



\$2.50 a year.

Entered at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., at Second Class Mail Rates.

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July 26, 1881.

No. 89. VOL. IV. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

A GILDED SIN.

By the author of "A Queen Amongst Women," "Dora Thorne,"
"From Gloom to Sunlight," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

"THE pleasant vices of our youth make lashes which scourge us in old age!"

No words were ever more true, more full of wisdom, more full of warning, than these.

So Sir Jasper Brandon thought on this Christmas Eve, when the mystery, the beauty, and tenderness of Christmas seemed to stir the quiet atmosphere of Queen's Chace.

He sat alone in his library.

Outside the sky was clear and blue, the air cold and biting; the hoar-frost lay white on the ground—the trees, the hedges, and the evergreens were bright with it.

Through the silent, frosty air came the joyous music of Christmas bells. What poetry they held, those Christmas bells—what sorrow, what pain, what lost love, what dead hopes, what pathetic happiness!

He listened, and his face grew sadder as the music came sweeter and clearer. Other music as sweet and hopeful came to him—the sounds of laughter and song; for Queen's Chace was filled with visitors, and they were keeping Christmas right royally.

He wished the bells would cease ringing; there was some mute reproach to him in the sound. He wished that Christmas were over; it brought him sad and sorrowful memories.

The one folly of his youth had grown into a lash which scourged him, which brought deep lines of pain and sorrow into his face, which darkened the bright world, and caused even Christmas to be full of sad memories.

As he sat thinking it all over it seemed to him that that one folly was to him the dearest part of his life. Even now, when years had closed over it, when time should have almost obliterated it—even now it was the brightest recollection he had; it stood out a golden memory from the background of a dark life—a love so sharp, so sudden, so beautiful, so keen, so passionate, that the dead ashes of it stirred the life within him. This was the story of his folly and his love.

He, Sir Jasper Brandon, was the only son of his parents. His father, Sir Francis, married late in life; his mother, Lady Maud, was young; he was their only child, and he was worshipped after a fashion that could have naught but evil results.

The anxiety with which his mother watched by his little bed, her agony of fear if even his finger ached, his father's equally speechless pride and joy in him, were almost pitiful to behold; they would fain have regulated even the very breath of heaven which blew on him. No child was ever so surrounded with love and care.

He grew up the very idol of their hearts; and what seemed wonderful was that the boy returned this love by one equally passionate and devoted.

The Brandons came of a Norman race, courtly, passionate, and silent—a race capable of the grandest deeds, but silent and reserved, imperious in love, implacable in war—swift, keen, sure, silent—a race that led hidden lives that the world never knew.

They were all alike, these Brandons of Queen's Chace, dark, proud, haughty, passionate men, swift to love, and loving with terrible intensity, of great virtues and great faults—handsome men, all of them, with dark, clear-cut, proud faces—faces, too, that men trusted and women loved.

The young heir, Jasper Brandon, was in no way inferior to his ancestors. In his twentieth year the manhood within him seemed suddenly to awaken to life. He would have no more indulgence, no more petting and humoring. They might love him just as much, even more if they could, but he must assert his rights.

He told his parents that he was going on a tour through Europe, and that for the next year or two they must be content to trust him to himself; yet when the time came for bidding them adieu, he almost repented of his decision. His mother clung to him, her tender arms clasping his neck, her tears falling on his face—his father held his hands.

"You will remember, Jasper," he said, "that you hold my life in your hands. I should never survive any wrong-doing of yours."

He smiled to himself, this proud young heir, thinking how improbable it was that he would be guilty of any "wrong-doing."

"If you live until I grieve you, father," he answered, "you will never die;" and those were his farewell words.

He traveled through Norway and Sweden, through Germany and Holland, through fair France and sunny Spain; but he lingered longest in fair and fruitful Italy, where it seemed to him that his soul first woke to its full and perfect life. Venice had the greatest charm for him; imperial Rome, gay Florence, ancient Verona, time-honored Milan, were all beautiful, but Venice charmed him; he loved it as a lover loves his mistress. All the poetry and passion of his nature woke to life there. The dark old palaces, the silent canals, the tranquil waters, the swiftly-gliding gondolas, were all so many poems to him.

He stood one day musing as he looked at the sculptured walls of a ducal palace, musing on the grand old Veronese tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, thinking of the balcony-scene, and the love that must have shone in the girl's face there, when suddenly from the lattice of a window near a girl's face peeped out—a girl's face—and he saw it only for one minute, yet in that minute the whole current of his life was changed.

Before that he had thought that at some distant time he should marry, and that fair children would grow up around him, but he had given no thought to love.

Now a swift, deep love took possession of him; he felt that that girl's face was the star of his life.

It was only a girl's face, with hair of light gold, and eyes of darkest hue—a face with a beautiful mouth—a face that once seen, could never be forgotten.

The girl looked slowly up and down the broad waters; then her eyes fell on the face upraised to hers, and she disappeared.

By dint of persevering inquiry he found out who she was

and learned her history; he resolved that he would marry her.

Her name was Giulia di Cyntha, and she lived alone in a dull, gloomy, half-ruined old palace with her elder sister Assunta.

They were the last descendants of a noble but ruined race. In the life of the elder sister Assunta there had been a tragedy.

She had been beautiful in her youth, with the dark picturesque beauty of the Venetian women; and her lover, who held an appointment under the Venetian Government as it existed then, had gone to England on political business, and there had been foully and treacherously murdered. For this Assunta hated the English and England with a deadly hatred.

She prayed morning and night for vengeance upon the perfidious and accursed country; she would have seen an Englishman die of hunger at her feet rather than have relieved him with even a crust of bread.

She was twenty years older than Giulia, and every year grew bitterer.

Their parents had died when she was twenty-six and the little golden-haired Giulia only six.

They had but little money; the gloomy old palace, with its faded hangings, its worm-eaten furniture, its air of decay, was theirs, but the income left to them was but scanty. Assunta brought up her little sister to hate England.

"Pray, child," she would say, "that Heaven may bless every land except England. Pray that the sun may shine and the dew fall on every land except that. It is accursed, for innocent blood was shed there."

But Giulia could not learn to hate; when she had finished her prayers, she would say in a low voice that Assunta could not hear:

"Heaven bless England too!"

Assunta watched the little Giulia grow until she became one of the loveliest maidens in Venice; but, when Jasper Brandon came from the land which she held accursed and asked for her treasure, she would not give her to him.

She drove him away with stern, cruel words; she told him she would rather that her beautiful Giulia lay drowned and dead in the waters of the canal than that she became his wife.

He had met her only five or six times when he asked her to be his wife—he had not written home about her. His whole life had been absorbed in his love.

He had forgotten his country, parents, friends; the swift, keen, sudden passion had taken possession of him; he had no life outside it, and he came of a race that never hesitated in love nor faltered in war.

When Assunta drove him from the threshold with bitter words, he made up his mind what to do. Looking into the face of the girl he loved, he said:

"I cannot live without you. Send me away, if you will—I will not live. Come with me, and I will make this world heaven for us both."

She assented.

He married her unknown to everyone, and took her away to a little place on the Mediterranean.

Assunta redoubled her prayers. Evil should, evil must come to the country which called such monsters of men sons.

She vowed solemnly never in life to see or speak to Giulia again—and she kept her word.

On those sweet Southern shores Jasper and Giulia dwelt for one year.

They lived on love one entire happy year.

There were times when Jasper roused himself, to wonder what his parents would say when he took his young bride home.

He had no time to ask for their consent to his marriage, and when he was married he had many misgivings. He knew that they had great hopes as to his marriage—that they wished him to wed Lady Marie Valdoraine; so he felt

that perhaps it would be better if he said nothing about it until he took his young wife home. Then, when they saw her, when their eyes dwelt on the beauty of her most fair face, they would forgive him and love her.

So for this one happy year they lived on beauty and love—on sunshine and flowers. And they were so unutterably happy that it seemed as though the ordinary doom of man was not to fall on them.

"There has never been a love so strong, so beautiful as ours," he would say to her.

So amidst the olives and the vines, amidst the gorgeous flowers and the starry blossoms on the shores of the sapphire sea, under the light of the golden sun and the shining stars, amidst the music of birds and the laughter of sweet blossoms, they lived and loved.

Only one year, and then the little child whose coming was to have crowned their happiness was born; but its birth cost its mother her life, and the same day on which the little Veronica opened her eyes, her mother, the beautiful golden-haired Giulia, closed her own for ever.

Swift to love and swift to hate were the Brandons of Queen's Chace.

He had loved the young mother with keen, intense passion—he hated the child with swift, keen hatred.

"Take it from my sight," he said to the weeping women. "Let me never see it. It has cost its mother her life."

And they carried it away, weeping womanly tears of compassion.

He could not forgive the child because of its mother's death—he could not look at it.

The nurses said the babe had its mother's eyes; and he thought to himself that to see Giulia's eyes in another's face would kill him.

He was more than half distraught when he bade Giulia's chief attendant write to Assunta to tell her of her sister's death.

She came at once. Perhaps the sight of the beautiful home he had prepared for his lost wife touched her heart, for, though she sternly refused to see Jasper, she declared her intention of adopting the child.

She would not exchange one word with him. All business was transacted through the kind friend who had stood by Giulia's death-bed.

Assunta promised to adopt the child if Jasper would renounce all claim to her—if he would allow her to bring her up after her own fashion, in perfect ignorance of him and all belonging to him, believing that her parents were dead; moreover, he must promise never to claim her.

He was kneeling by his dead wife's side when these conditions were brought to him, and the dumb white lips could not open to say: "Love her because she was mine," the cold hands could not be clasped in supplication to him, the mother's heart could not speak in the closed eyes.

The only human being who could have saved the little one lay there, "stone dead and still;" and as he looked at the beautiful face, so calm in the majesty of death, he turned to the bearer of the message and said:

"Tell Assunta di Cyntha that in proportion as I loved my wife I dislike the child, and that I give her entirely to her, never wishing to see her or hear of her again."

At the same time he was just. He offered to settle a certain sum of money on the little one, more than sufficient to educate and to dower her. Assunta's pale face flushed crimson when she heard it.

"I touch that accursed English gold!" she cried. "I would see all Venice perish first!"

Without another word she took the child in her arms and left the house.

Even in death she refused to look on the face of her sister again.

Then came for Jasper a long blank. He remembered in after years that he had stood by the grave of his wife—he remembered falling upon it with a loud, bitter cry—then came a blank.

The roses and passion-flowers were in full bloom when

that happened; when he recovered his senses, the roses had withered, the passion-flowers were dead, and the winter was coming.

He was lying, not in his own house—wise doctors had forbidden that—but in one of the large hotels in Venice, fighting for life.

He lived, but the world was never the same to him again. His youth, his love, his hopes, his heart—all lay in the grave of his young wife.

He was never the same. When he was strong enough to travel, he returned home, and his parents were almost beside themselves with grief at his changed face.

"A fever caught in Italy" explained it all. Lady Brandon sighed mournfully over it. "Ah, if he had but been content to stay at home!"

Then he realized what he had done, what he had suffered, what he had lost.

He was not ashamed of his marriage, but he shut up the sweet sad love-story in his heart, guarding it as a miser guards his gold—not to have saved his life could he have spoken Giulia's name.

It seemed impossible to him that anyone should ever understand that sweet mad love of his. How should they? And he could not tell them. He could not bare that wound to any human eye.

It would have been easier for him to plunge a sword into his heart than to talk of Giulia and Venice. He shut up the sweet sad story in his heart and lived on it.

People called him proud and cold, reserved and silent; they never dreamed of the burning love beneath the ice; there was no one who ever suspected him of a wild, passionate love and a sorrow that would be his until he died.

No one knew that he had loved as few love, and that his heart lay buried in a dead wife's grave.

Time passed on; he grew stronger; the full tide of health and strength returned to him, and with it came a longing to take his share in the full active life around him.

"Make me feel the wild pulsation that I felt before the strife,
When I had my days before me, and the tumult of my life."

That was his one cry—work, toil, labor—anything that could teach him to forget. He plunged into the hottest fray of political life; his speeches rang through all England; men named him with deepest admiration.

He was a power in the state; he spent his days in work, his nights in study.

Did he forget? At times, when busy members round him were disputing vehemently, he found himself standing on the Rialto at Venice, gazing at a sweet girl-face. He found himself under the vines, with roses and passion-flowers clustering at his feet, white hands warmly clasped in his own, and a golden head lying on his breast.

They wondered, those who watched him, why at times he rose suddenly with a stifling cry, flinging out his arms as though the breath of life failed him.

They thought the passion of his own words moved him. How should they guess of the sweet short love and the tragedy which had ended it?

Once, and once only, he was induced to enter a theater; it was when one of the finest living tragedians was to appear.

He never thought of asking what the play was, but, when the curtain rose and he saw Venice, he almost swooned like a dead man, smitten with a terrible pain. Still no one knew the cause; it was all buried in his own heart—he himself was the sepulcher of his love.

Time passed on. Sir Francis grew old and feeble; his one longing was to see his son married before he died. The first time that he mentioned it Jasper drew back with horror on his face.

"Marry?" He with his heart in that far-off grave! And the father looking into the son's face, saw a tragedy there. He said no more to him for a long time; but one day, when he was weak and ill, he cried out:

"Jasper, you must marry. My son, let me see your children round my knees before I die."

The words touched him greatly; and that same day his mother came to him with a pleased, expectant look on her face.

"Jasper," she said, "the daughter of my dearest friend is coming to Queen's Chace—Marie Valdoraine—and I should die happy if I could see her your wife."

Lady Marie came—a handsome, animated blonde, with the worship of Mammon in her heart. She was most lively and fascinating.

She won the heart of Sir Francis.

She made Lady Brandon love her; even Jasper, with the shadow of dead love darkening his life, was pleased with her.

Lady Marie Valdoraine was of the world worldly; she knew the just value of everything.

She saw that there was no position in England more enviable than that of Lady Brandon of Queen's Chace, and she determined that it should be hers.

She devoted herself so entirely to Jasper that in a certain way he relied upon her; her keen worldly knowledge and her just appreciation of persons and things were useful to him.

"If you are really going to devote your life to politics," said a friend to him one day, "you should marry Lady Marie. She could manage everything for you."

And the end of it was that, to give pleasure to his parents, he married Lady Marie.

But he was quite honest with her. He did not tell her the story of his marriage—he could not have borne her questions, her wonder, her remarks, and have lived—his dead love was far too sacred for that—but he told her that he had no love to give her, but honor and esteem only.

Lady Marie smiled in the most charming manner.

She mentally congratulated herself—if she could have all the good things that belonged to Queen's Chace without being teased about love, so much the better.

The marriage took place, and everyone thought well of it; people said it was the most suitable match they had ever known—universal approval followed it.

Sir Francis declared he had nothing left to live for. Lady Brandon was quite content.

As time passed on it became more and more evident that the marriage was a most suitable one.

Lady Marie Brandon flung herself heart and soul into her husband's interests—he owned himself that she was his right hand.

When his reasonings, his clear, pitiless logic failed, then her powers of fascination succeeded.

Lady Marie Brandon became a power in her way; her season in town was always one long brilliant success; her drawing-rooms were always crowded; people attended her balls and *soirees* as though they had received royal bidings.

Jasper had his reward.

When old Sir Francis lay dying he called his son to his bedside and laid his trembling hands in blessing on him.

"You have been a good son to me, Jasper," he said. "You have never given me one moment's sorrow or pain; so in dying I bless you and thank you!"

They were pleasant words; they repaid him for having sacrificed his inclination and married Lady Marie Valdoraine.

Old Sir Francis died with a smile on his face, and Jasper succeeded him.

Some months afterwards a little daughter was born to him, who, by his mother's wish, was called Katherine, and, when Katherine was a child of seven, Lady Brandon died. Then Sir Jasper and his wife took up their abode at Queen's Chace.

The time came when his name was a tower of strength in the land, when men rejoiced to see him at the head of the mightiest party, when he became the very hope of the

nation from his clear, calm judgment, his earnest truth, his marvelous talents.

No one ever asked if he were happy in the midst of it all.

He was courted, popular, famous, but his face was not the face of a happy man, and once—his wife never forgot it—he had fallen asleep after, perhaps, the most brilliant reception ever accorded to a public man, and, when Lady Brandon went to rouse him, the pillow on which his head had lain was wet with tears.

CHAPTER II.

SEVENTEEN years had passed since the birth of Katherine Brandon, and no other child had been given to Queen's Chace.

The long-wished-for heir had never appeared, and the hopes of both parents were centered in the beautiful young heiress. She was just seventeen, and a more perfectly lovely ideal of an English girl could not have been found.

To look at her was a pleasure. The tall, slender figure, with its perfect lines and curves, the face, with its glow of youthful health, the subtle grace of movement, the free easy carriage, the quick graceful step, were all as pleasant as they were rare.

Like her mother, she was a blonde beauty; but she had more color, greater vigor. Her hair was of golden brown—pure gold in the sunlight, brown in the shade.

Her eyes were of a lovely violet hue; they looked like pansies steeped in dew. Her face had a most exquisite color, lilies and roses so perfectly blended that it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended. It was an English face—no other land could have produced such a one. The mouth was beautiful, the lips were sweet and arch, revealing little white teeth that shone like pearls; a lovely dimpled chin, a white rounded throat, and beautiful hands, completed the list of charms. There was an air of vitality and health about her that was irresistible.

She was as English in character as in face. She had none of the characteristics of the silent, courtly race of Brandons. She was essentially Saxon, true in thought, word, and deed, sincere, earnest, transparently candid, generous, slightly prejudiced and intolerant, proud with a quick, bright pride that was but "a virtue run to seed"—a most charming, lovable character, not perhaps of the most exalted type.

She would never have made a poetess or a tragedy-queen; there was no sad, tragical story in her lovely young face; but she was essentially womanly, quickly moved to sweetest pity and compassion, keenly sensitive, nobly generous.

All her short sweet life she had been called "Heiress of Queen's Chace." She was woman enough to be more than pleased with her lot in life—she was proud of it. She loved the bright beautiful world, and, above all, she loved her own share in it.

She would rather have been heiress of Queen's Chace, she declared, than Queen of England. She loved the place, she enjoyed the honors and advantages connected with it. She had inherited just sufficient of her mother's character to make her appreciate the advantages of her position.

The great difference between them was that Lady Brandon loved the wealth, the pomp, the honors of the world, while Katherine loved its brightness and its pleasures.

Sir Jasper was very much attached to his daughter; his own wife never reminded him of his lost love, but his daughter did. Something in her bright, glad youth, in her sunny laughter, in her bright eyes, reminded him of the beautiful Venetian girl whom he had loved so madly. In these later years all the love of his life had centered in his daughter, all the little happiness that he enjoyed came from her—with her he forgot his life-long pain, and was at peace.

She was heiress of Queen's Chace. He had taken the greatest pride and care in her education. She was accomplished in the full sense of the word. She spoke French,

Italian and German. She sang with a clear, sweet voice. She danced gracefully, and was no mean artist. Her father had taken care that no pains should be spared in her education, no expense, no labor. The result was she developed into a brilliantly accomplished girl. He was delighted with her.

Katherine Brandon had made her *debut*; royal eyes had glanced kindly at the fair, bright young face. She had more lovers than she could count; a beauty, a great heiress, clever, accomplished, with a laugh like clear music, and spirits that never failed, no wonder that some of the most eligible men in England were at her feet. She only laughed at them at present. It was the time for smiles; tears would come afterwards. If there was one she liked a little better than the rest, it was Lord Wynleigh, the second son of the Earl of Woodwyn, the poorest earl in England.

Lord Wynleigh was handsome and clever. He had had a hard fight with the world, for he found it difficult to keep up appearances on a small income; but he forgot his poverty and everything else when he fell in love with charming, tantalizing, imperious Katherine Brandon.

Would she ever care for him? At present the difference in her behavior towards him and her other lovers was that she laughed more at him, affected greater indifference to him, but never looked at him, and she flushed crimson at the mention of his name.

That same year Sir Jasper was much overtaken with work; he was so ill as to be compelled to consult a physician, who told him that he could not always live at high pressure, and that if he wished to save himself he must give up work, and rest for a time.

In order to do this, the illustrious statesman decided on going to Queen's Chace, the home that he loved so well.

Some one suggested that he should go abroad. He shrank with horror from the idea.

So the whole family went to Queen's Chace. Sir Jasper invited a party of friends for Christmas. Until Christmas he promised himself perfect rest.

It was at the beginning of October that he received the letter which so altered the course of his life and that of others.

It was from Assunta di Cyntha—written on her death-bed.

Perhaps her approaching dissolution had shown her that she had misjudged some things and mistaken others.

She wrote to the man whom she had hated with such deadly hate, and the words she used were more gracious than any she had ever used before.

She told him that she should soon rejoin her sister—the young wife he had so dearly loved, and that she could not die until her child was safe and well provided for.

"If I had money of my own," she wrote, "I should not trouble you; but I have none—my income dies with me, and the old palace that has been my home passes into other hands. I have nothing to leave my beautiful Veronica, and you must take her. She is beautiful and gifted, but she is unlike other girls because she has led a lonely life. She believes that her father is dead. She knows nothing of her parentage or of her birth. I have taught her—Heaven pardon me if I have done wrong—to hate the English. My lessons may bear evil fruit or good—I know not. I understand the child as no one else ever can, and I say to you most decidedly, if ever you wish to win her love or her heart, do not shock her at first by telling her that you are her father; remember she has been taught to hate the English, and to believe that her father is dead. Let her learn to know you and to love you first, then tell her when you will. I impress this on you, for I know her well. I will forward by her all papers that are necessary to prove her birth. Send for Veronica at once. I know that I have not many hours to live."

He was sitting in the drawing-room at Queen's Chace when that letter was brought to him. His daughter Katherine was at the piano, singing some of the old English ballads that he loved.

Lady Brandon lay on the couch engrossed in a novel. A clear, bright fire was burning in the grate; the warm air was perfumed with the odor of flowers.

He raised his haggard face as he read.

Great Heaven! what was he to do? He had almost forgotten the very existence of the child. She had faded from his memory.

His passionate love for her beautiful mother was as keen as ever—as full of life as it had been on the first day he met her; but the child he had disliked; the child had cost her mother her life.

Why had Assunta given her that sweet, sad name of "Veronica?" What was he to do with her when she came?

He looked at his handsome wife, with her high-bred face and dignified manner; he looked at his lovely young daughter, and then bowed his head in despair.

A thought had pierced his soul. During all these years he had forgotten the child; she had passed, as it were, out of his life; Assunta had taken her, and would keep her.

She had refused his help; she would have nothing from him. She would take no money, nor anything else from him. She had told him that he must wash his hands of the child, and he had done so.

If ever he thought about her, he concluded that she would be brought up in entire ignorance of England, and of him, that she would marry some Venetian; but of late he had thought but little of her, and during the past three or four years she had faded from his mind.

So the letter was a terrible blow to him. He asked himself what he should do, for it had suddenly occurred to him that Veronica was his eldest daughter, and that she—not the golden-haired girl singing with the clear voice of a bird—was the heiress of Queen's Chace, and the thought pierced his soul like a sharp sword.

What should he do?

His first impulse was to tell his story; then second thoughts came—he could not.

Of all people living his wife was perhaps the most unsympathetic; he could not take the treasured love-story from his heart and hold it up to public gaze; he could not have uttered the name of Giulia, nor have told how she died, when the sun was setting, with her head on his breast.

It would have been easier for him to tear the living, beating heart from his breast than to do this.

He could imagine his wife's cold, proud, handsome eyes dilating in unmitigated wonder; he could hear the cold, grave voice saying: "What a romance! Why have you hidden it all these years?" He could anticipate the sneers, the comments about the great statesman's love-story. Ah, if it had but been possible for him to die with her!

So he sat there musing, with Assunta's letter in his hand.

He found afterwards that he had missed one paragraph, in which she told him that she had prepared Veronica to live for the future with her English guardian.

Sir Jasper Brandon suffered keenly. He was an English gentleman, with English notions of right and wrong. He hated all injustice, all concealment, all deceit, all fraud, all wrong-doing, all dishonesty; yet he did not, on receipt of Assunta's letter, tell his wife and daughter the truth.

He said to himself that he would come to no decision, that he would wait and see what Veronica was like.

"You look perplexed and thoughtful, papa," said Katherine. "Let me help you. Women's wits, they say, are quicker and keener than men's."

"It is a libel," he replied, trying to speak lightly. "I may well look perplexed, Katherine—I am dismayed."

Lady Brandon closed her book and looked at him.

"You dismayed!" she cried. "What has happened? Has Brookes voted with the Opposition, or what?"

"It is nothing of that kind," said the politician. "This

is a domestic difficulty, about which I shall have to ask your help."

At the word "domestic" Lady Brandon opened her book again—matters of that description never interested her.

"The fact is," continued Sir Jasper, "that a friend of mine has died lately in Italy, and has left me a ward."

"A ward!" cried Lady Brandon. "How intolerable! What a liberty to take!"

"A ward!" cried Katherine. "How strange, papa?"

Sir Jasper turned quickly to his wife. He never spoke unkindly or angrily to her, even when she annoyed him.

"Do not say 'intolerable,' Marie; we must make the best of it."

"But who is it?" cried her ladyship. "Of course, if it be anyone of position, that would make a difference."

"The young lady—my ward, Veronica di Cyntha—is descended from one of the first families of Italy," he said, "and she has, or will have, a large fortune."

"And is that too placed in your hands?" asked his wife.

"That also is in my hands," he replied, briefly.

"But, Jasper," cried her ladyship, "surely you are going to tell us more? Who is, or rather who was, your friend? Tell me; I want to know the whole history."

He walked to the end of the long drawing-room and back before he replied; then he said, briefly:

"I have nothing to tell. I met the Di Cynthas when I was abroad, and that accounts for the trust, so far as I can account for it."

Lady Brandon had studied her husband long enough to know that when he spoke in the tone that he now did it was quite useless to persevere in making inquiries.

"Some friends whom he met in Italy," she said to herself. "Most probably, as he is so reticent, it was a political friend—indeed, now I come to think of it, that solves the mystery. There is a political secret hidden under the mystery."

Once feeling sure of that, Lady Brandon resigned herself to circumstances. A political secret, she knew quite well, could never be forced from her husband's keeping.

"But what will you do with a ward in Italy, papa?" asked Katherine.

Sir Jasper turned his careworn face to her, and it cleared a little as he met the gaze of the bright, sweet eyes.

"That is the difficulty, Katherine," he replied; "her property will be in England, and she must come and live with us."

Again Lady Brandon looked up—this time there was some little contempt on her face.

"That is impossible, Sir Jasper," she said; "I could not think of receiving a stranger into the very heart of my home."

He paused for a few minutes before answering her, and then he said gently:

"You have always been so kind to me, Marie, so attentive to my interests, that I am sure you will never refuse anything that will be of service to me."

"Would it be of service?" she asked quickly.

"Most assuredly it would," he replied. "You would help me out of a real difficulty."

"Then," said Lady Brandon, "if it will serve your interests I will do it. I withdraw my opposition."

Sir Jasper bent down and kissed the white jeweled hands.

"You have always studied my interests," he said, "and I am always grateful."

"It will be just as though I had a sister," said Katherine—and the words struck Sir Jasper like a blow. "I wonder what she is like, papa? Dark, I suppose, as she is Italian? We shall contrast well. I need not be jealous if she is a brunette. I will be very kind to her. Is it her father or her mother who has just died, papa?"

Again he shuddered as the careless words fell on his ear. He made a pretence of not having heard what she said; and Katherine, with her quick instinct, seeing that the question was not agreeable to him, did not press it.

Both ladies settled the matter in their own minds and according to their lights.

Lady Brandon concluded that the dead friend had probably been one who shared her husband's political secrets; and Katherine thought to herself that it was probably someone whom her father had known in his youth.

They were both content, and talked quite amiably about it.

Sir Jasper bore it as long as he could; then he quitted the room and went to his study.

"You see, Katherine," said Lady Brandon, "if the girl is really noble and wealthy, it will be an acquisition rather than otherwise."

"I am pleased about it, mamma," cried the girl. "I have always felt the want of a sister; now I shall have one."

"I would not say anything about that, my dear, until you have seen what she is like," said prudent Lady Brandon; "it is always better not to commit one's self in any way."

They discussed the matter in all its bearings; there was complete confidence between this mother and child.

Katherine laughed at her mother's very candid worldliness; she teased her about her worship of Mammon. But she was very fond of her; while Lady Brandon worshipped her beautiful child—she thought there was no one like her in the wide world—all the love of which she was capable, the love of heart and soul, was centered on and in her darling.

Meanwhile Sir Jasper was in a fever of dismay. What should he do? It was as though the dead ghost of his youth had suddenly risen up before him; he was utterly unnerved.

Then it became clear to him that he must send someone to fetch her. Whom could he send? He could not go himself—he was not strong enough to travel; nor did he care to see again the place where he had suffered so much.

He decided that the best person to send would be his agent, John Segrave, a sensible, experienced man of the world.

He wrote at once to summon Mr. Segrave; and, when he had reached Queen's Chace, he told him exactly the same story that he had told his wife.

"I want you to go to Italy," he said, "to bring back with you a young lady, my ward, who is for the future to make her home with Lady Brandon."

The agent set out, amply provided with funds; and then Sir Jasper spent day and night in a state of terrible suspense.

What would she be like, this daughter of his lost Giulia? Would she torture him with her mother's face—with her mother's eyes?

If so, he could not bear it—he should go mad. By night and by day he asked himself that question—what would she be like?

December came with its frost and cold, its biting wind and snow-bound earth, before that question was answered. It was on the second of December that he received a letter from Mr. Segrave, saying that he hoped to reach the Chace with his charge on the following day.

Sir Jasper was greatly agitated, although he beat down his emotion with an iron hand.

She was coming—Giulia's little child, who had nestled for one brief moment in her mother's dying arms—Giulia's little daughter—the babe from whom he had turned with something like bitter hate in his heart.

What would she be like? He asked about her rooms, and Katherine took him to see them—a pretty suite of rooms in the western wing; they looked very bright in the winter sunlight, with their cheerful fires and choice flowers.

"She will like these rooms, papa," said Katherine. "See what I have put here—all the Italian views and photographs that I can find. See—here is the Arno, here is the Rialto in Venice."

She stopped suddenly. Why did he pause and turn from

her with a sharp, sudden cry? There was the very spot on which he had stood when Giulia's fair face first shone down upon him!

"It is nothing, child," he said, in answer to her anxious inquiries—"less than nothing—a sharp, sudden pain that hurts but will never kill me."

"How do you know that it will never kill you, papa?" she asked.

"Because, my darling, if it could have shortened my life, it would have done so long ago," he replied. "Now show me all the arrangements you have made for my ward."

"Papa," cried generous beautiful Katherine, "she will be very dull, she will be very lonely. Do you suppose that she is alone in the world—that she has no other friends but us? If she had but one, it would be something."

"I cannot tell you, Katherine," he replied. "You must ask her when she comes."

He was pleased to see the arrangements his wife and daughter had made for her, yet, as the time for her arrival drew near, he trembled and shuddered like one seized with sudden cold. He had to meet the child he had literally given away—Giulia's daughter.

CHAPTER III.

VERONICA stood before her father—a tall, beautiful woman with a noble Venetian face. She was quite unlike anything he had pictured. He had fancied a girl with Giulia's sweet face, with her golden hair and sensitive lips.

The girl before him looked like a Roman Empress but that she had Giulia's eyes—her dark, tender, passionate eyes—the eyes that had made for him the only light he had ever known—with hair as black as night and worn after the old Grecian fashion.

She was more beautiful than her young mother had ever been, but it was a different type of loveliness.

As he gazed upon her, Sir Jasper Brandon owned to himself that it was the most beautiful and the saddest face that he had ever seen. The dark eyes had a story in their depths, the proud lips trembled even as she smiled.

"Where have I seen a face something like it?" he asked himself. Then he remembered that it was in one of his favorite pictures hanging in the Louvre.

He had gone himself to the station to meet her. Lady Brandon was very shrewd, and Katherine was shrewder still.

He felt that he might betray himself. So he had decided on meeting Veronica that the first shock might pass unperceived. And a shock it was when she looked up at him with Giulia's eyes.

He stood still for a few moments, beating back the anguish that almost mastered him; then he held out his hands in greeting to her.

"Veronica," he said gently, "welcome to England!" He did not kiss the beautiful face—he dared not trust himself. "Welcome!" he repeated, adding, "Do you speak English?"

To his surprise she answered him in English; she spoke the language exceedingly well, but with a slight foreign accent that was very musical and charming.

"Yes, I speak English; it was my own wish. I learned by my own desire; my aunt was very unwilling."

"Why did you wish to learn?" he said. "It is harsh after your beautiful liquid Italian."

"I cannot tell; but something seemed always to stir in my heart at the very mention of England. I hardly knew whether it was pain or pleasure, for it was unlike either. Now I know what it was!"

"What?" he asked, wondering if any idea of the truth had occurred to her.

"It was a foreboding," she replied; "it was because I had to come to England." Then she glanced at him again.

"Are you my guardian?" she asked timidly.

"Yes," he replied. "I came to meet you; I thought you would feel dull at first in a strange country."

"I have been dull all my life," she said with a smile—the saddest smile he had ever seen.

"We must try to make you happier," he said.

"Why are you my guardian?" she asked. "I cannot understand it. My aunt never spoke to me of you until she was dying, and then she told me that far away in England there lived a rich gentleman who would be my guardian when she was dead—that I was to live with him in England and be docile to him. It will not be difficult to be very docile to you."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I like you," she answered simply. "I can always tell at first sight whether I shall like anyone or not, and I do like you."

He helped her into the carriage and sat down by her side; the servants were busy with her luggage.

Mr. Segrave drove home with Sir Jasper and his ward, and all the way the baronet was saying to himself:

"This is Giulia's daughter; that beautiful head lay on Giulia's breast—that is Giulia's child!" He longed to clasp her in his arms, to say: "You have your mother's eyes, child; you have the same sweet voice and the same loving heart."

All his fancied dislike melted as he gazed on her. He wondered how he could have hated her, how he could have forgotten her.

He reproached himself for it with bitter reproaches. How could he have been unkind to Giulia's child?

"I have been dull all my life," she had said, and the words smote him with pain. He longed to say to her, "I am your father, Veronica, but my love for your mother is shut up in my heart. It is my most cherished secret; it is so sacred to me that I cannot talk of it; I cannot tell others of it; it is the very core of my heart." He was sorely tempted, but "Not yet," he said to himself—"not yet."

He turned to her suddenly.

"Tell me about your life, Veronica," he said. "What made it so dull? How have you spent it?"

"I have lived always with my Aunt Assunta," she replied, "and my aunt was a woman whose heart must have been broken when she was very young, I think. She never laughed, she never even smiled, but she hated the English. 'They are as perfidious,' she said, 'as Judas. The sun never shines on England; it is always dark with Heaven's frown.' She would not let me have any friends. We used to sit for days and months and years in that dark old palace, watching the water, watching the sky, seldom speaking a word. She gave me histories to read, and after many prayers she allowed me to have masters for painting—nothing else; and for many years I have passed my life in reading dull histories and in painting."

"Poor child," he said, "it was not a very bright life, was it?"

"No. I have often asked her to tell me where my mother and father lie buried; but my aunt would never inform me. I have never seen my mother's grave."

Sir Jasper's face grew white with emotion. He said to himself, "It is Giulia's child who has led this sad life—who has never known one bright hour."

He dared not look at her lest she should wonder at the pain on his face.

"How old are you, Veronica?" he asked.

"I am twenty, as men count years," she said. "It seems to me that I have lived a century in the dark old palace. It was full of spirits who wailed all night through the long dark passages. When my aunt was very angry with me, she said always that I was a child, an ignorant child. I think myself I am very old, more like a woman whose years are run than a child."

"You will not feel so when you have lived a little longer," he said gently. "Veronica, look round you. This is an English winter. Do you see how white the ground is—how great icicles hang like huge diamonds from the trees and hedges? When the sun shines on the snow and

sparkles on the ice, I do not think there is a grander sight in the world."

"I wonder," said Veronica musingly, "why my aunt disliked England so much—do you know?"

He tried to answer her indifferently.

"It would require a very learned philosopher to understand a lady's likes and dislikes," he said. "Veronica, you say that you have had a very sad life; let me advise you to try to forget it—forget the gloomy aunt who seems to have been so mistaken. Just as a flower opens its heart to the sun, open yours to the sunshine of happiness. Will you try?"

"I will try," she answered. "I will do anything you tell me."

Then he pointed out to her the beauties of the park through which they were driving, and then, in the distance, the towers of Queen's Chace.

"How beautiful!" she cried. "And see—the sun shines on it; it looks as though Heaven were blessing it."

He wondered what she would say if she knew that this superb house ought one day by right to be hers.

"Tell me," she cried—"what do you call this beautiful place? Teach me to say it; teach me to say your name. What must I call you?"

And he taught Giulia's child to call him Sir Jasper, while longing with all his heart to hear the word "father" from her lips.

"Some day," he said to himself, "I will tell her all about it, and she will know. Then I will ask her to call me 'father'—and I shall hear all earth's music in the word."

Sir Jasper said one thing to Veronica on entering the house. He turned to her with an expression of pain on his face.

"Veronica," he said, "I want to ask you one favor—that is, I wish to give you a piece of advice, afterwards you will know the reason why. I advise you to say nothing whatever of the home you have left. People are sure to ask you questions. Do not answer them; evade them."

Veronica, looking up at him with the simple faith of a child, replied:

"I will—I will do whatever you tell me."

And he knew from that moment that any secret, anything which touched his interests, was as safe in her hands as in his own.

He never forgot the expression of utter astonishment on Lady Brandon's face as the young girl came forward with her graceful, self-possessed manner to speak to her.

"I really thought," she said afterwards to her husband, "that an old Venetian figure had descended from its frame. What a face she has, Jasper! It is essentially Venetian, not Florentine—I know the Florentine type so well—nor Roman, but purely Venetian. Her mother must have been a beautiful woman."

He winced at the words, but made no reply.

Lady Brandon smiled as she continued:

"She is a great contrast to Katherine. I am not sure that it is wise to bring a rival beauty into the house."

Sir Jasper looked up impatiently; this woman's tattle annoyed him.

"She will never harm Katherine," he said, somewhat sternly. "Do not put ideas of that kind into Kate's head. I want her to like the young stranger. See—that is a pretty picture."

Husband and wife were standing by the fireplace in the Yellow Drawing-room, as one of the prettiest apartments at Queen's Chace was called.

The two girls were at the other end—Katherine seated on a low chair, her golden head thrown back, and Veronica kneeling on the ground by her side. The two faces were each lovely, yet differed entirely. Veronica was gazing at the English girl with something like rapture in her face. Katherine was a new revelation of beauty to her.

"Tell me something about your home," said Katherine. "The one dream of my life is to go to Italy; but papa will never hear of it."

Veronica gave one hasty glance across the room to the dark, handsome face of the man who had so great an influence over her. Remembering her promise, she answered.

"Ask me about anything you will," she replied, "except about home. I cannot speak of it."

Katherine looked at the flushed face, and, thinking that the subject was one too sad for her, she stooped and kissed her.

"I will not ask you about home or anything else that grieves you, Veronica," she said. "It must be very sad; you have lost everything—everyone. But you will be happy with us after a time. You shall be my sister—I have always longed for one; and you will love papa—everyone loves him when they know him."

It was strange but typical that she did not speak of Lady Brandon. She said nothing about loving her.

"Kiss me, Veronica," she said—"not coldly, but as if you were really my own sister. I shall love you as though you were."

The dark eyes filled slowly with tears.

"You will love me?" she said. "It seems impossible; it is too good—it cannot be true. You will really love me?"

"Why should I not?" asked Katherine, wondering at the girl's emotion.

"Why should you, rather?" she replied. "You are so different from me. You seem to me like a fairy princess. You live in the midst of beauty and magnificence; everyone loves you; even the servants who wait upon you seem almost to worship you. You have the sunshine ever on your head. Look at these bright threads of gold! You seem to me more lovely than a poet's dream."

Katherine laughed; flattery was always pleasant to her. She experienced a girl's natural delight in being called lovely. Then she passed her white fingers over the bowed head.

"Has no one ever told you that you were beautiful?"

"No; I have never heard anyone speak of me in that way," replied Veronica.

"Then let me tell you now," said Katherine. "You are a thousand times more beautiful than I am. But I am not jealous of you—I love you. Mine is a pretty pink-and-white, healthy, happy kind of beauty; yours is a grand, half-sad, wholly imperial loveliness. I am like a rosebud; you are like a mystical passion-flower. There are hundreds of girls like me, there can be few others like you."

"Is it really true?" asked Veronica. "Am I really beautiful? Tell me, *Caterina mia*, do you think that anyone who saw me for the first time would like me?"

"I am sure that everyone would admire you very much, and those who knew you would love you."

"It seems so strange," said Veronica—and Katherine saw a light come over her face—"so strange. I have never thought of myself in that way at all. I have often wondered if ever anyone would love me."

"Did they not love you at home?" asked Katherine, surprised.

"We will not talk of home," was the reply, uttered sadly.

"No; you are the first person in all the world who ever said to me, 'I love you!'"

"I am glad, yet sorry," said the English girl slowly.

A strange light came over Veronica's face; her eyes darkened, a quiver passed over her lips.

"Yes, you are the first," she said; "and because in all my life you have been the first to say to me, 'I love you,' I swear fealty to you—I will be true to you until death—I will be a friend more than in name. If the time should ever come when, by laying down my life, I can save yours, I will do it. If the time should ever come when I can take a trouble from you, or by suffering myself save you from suffering, I will do it or undergo it."

Katherine was touched by the earnest, passionate words.

"How much you think of kind words, Veronica!" she said quietly.

"Ah, you do not know! I have been all my long solitary

life without them. For years I heard but one voice, and it never addressed me kindly. No one in all this world has been so utterly alone."

"It is all ended now," said Katherine; "you have us to love you."

"Yes, it is ended," returned Veronica. "Do you know, Caterina, that I could not believe the world was fair or bright? It seemed to me impossible. I knew that the skies were blue, and that the light of the sun was all golden, but I did not understand the glory and the loveliness that seems common to you. Once, long ago, I found an old book of poems, and I read them. They were all about the beauty and passion and tenderness of life. I thought the man who wrote them—Alfieri—was mad; now I think there was some method in his madness. Do you know, Caterina—I like to give you the sweet, soft Italian name—that for long years I have never had but one thought, and that that was how soon Heaven would let me die?"

Katherine caressed the dark shining waves of hair.

"Such thoughts as those have brought all those mystical shadows into your eyes, Veronica; we must have no more of them," she said.

"Even my name," remarked the girl, "has a sad kind of music in it. And so you love me, Katherine? Tell me what to do for you, how to thank you, how to serve you. I will see with your eyes, I will hear with your ears. I shall go to sleep happy, I shall wake up happy, thinking to myself that some one deems me beautiful, and that some one loves me. You have brightened all my life for me by your goodness."

"I do not think it is goodness," said Katherine; "with me it is simply that I cannot help it."

"It might have been different," rejoined Veronica. "You might have been angry and vexed that a stranger should come into your home—the very heart of your home as it were—you might have received me coolly, treated me unkindly, laughed at me even because of my strange dress and strange manners—but you have been an angel of goodness to me. For that," she continued, with the sudden passion that made her so beautiful, "I will give you my life should you need it, my service always, my love if you will take it; my heart always."

They formed certainly one of the prettiest of pictures—the English girl, with her bright, fair beauty, her golden hair, her dress of white silk, her shining jewels, her happy, loving, bright manner, and the dark-eyed Venetian, with her pale, passionate, matchless loveliness, her black robes so quaint and picturesque.

Then, as they talked longer, gradually they changed attitudes; it was Veronica who became the protector, and Katherine the younger sister.

Their lives had been so different, yet they were children of one father.

Veronica's one wonder was the long, shining golden hair. She never tired of caressing it, of twining it round her fingers, of praising it.

"Do you know," she said to Katherine, "that once—oh, long ago!—I was arranging an old wardrobe for my aunt, and I saw a little parcel of white paper. I opened it, and inside of it lay a long tress of shining golden hair so much like this. I was almost frightened at it, it seemed to twine round my fingers as though it were living. I took it to my aunt and showed it to her. She grew so angry. 'Whenever you see hair like that,' she said, 'always pray that England may be ruined by its own gold, by the greed of its sons and the folly of its daughters.' Her words come back to my mind now as I hold this golden hair in my hands."

"They were very horrible words, and your aunt must have been wicked to utter them. What harm had the English done her?"

"I cannot tell, but she hated them. She was angry that I wished to learn English; but I would. It was strange that when she hated it I should love it. I think England beautiful. Our Venice is, perhaps, one of the fairest spots on earth, but everything seems brighter and happier here."

"Papa," said Katherine that same evening, "I fancy your ward Veronica has been very unhappy all her life."

"I hope not," he returned, quietly.

"I feel sure of it. I have been contrasting her lot with mine. How strange it is, papa, that in this world things are so unequal! Some have so much, others so little. Veronica seems to me to have had nothing."

He made no reply, but he thought to himself that it was hard, seeing that they were children of one father. Later on he drew Katherine's golden head down and kissed her face.

"You will be kind to Veronica, my dear?" he said. "A joyless life is hard to bear."

And Katherine obeyed him, because it was impossible to know Veronica and not to love her.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE two weeks had passed Veronica was quite at home at Queen's Chace.

Lady Brandon, who had at first been inclined to look upon the whole matter as a misfortune, now began to think otherwise.

She thought to herself that the next season she would be more popular than ever. She would be mother of one of the fairest blondes and chaperon of one of the most beautiful brunettes.

She saw that the two girls would never be rivals, their style differed so greatly, and she began to take great interest in Veronica.

She went to her husband and told him that she must have *carte blanche* for Veronica's wardrobe.

"It is very well," said her ladyship, "to look like a picture; but dressing like one is quite a different matter. Your ward must dress like other people, Sir Jasper. I suppose she can have what money she likes?"

"Certainly," replied Sir Jasper, "she is an heiress, I have told you. She must be treated as one," and soon afterwards he placed in her hands a check for three hundred pounds. "We can arrange later on," he added, "about her yearly allowance—at present purchase for her everything that she requires."

"Her wants are legion," said Lady Brandon; "she has literally nothing, except a few picturesque old dresses that would look very nice in an old curiosity shop."

Lady Brandon set to work at once. She knew too well the effect of dress to offer to transform Veronica into a fashionable English lady.

Everything she purchased was made after some picturesque Venetian fashion; and Sir Jasper was pleased when he saw it.

"You have preserved the unities," he said to his wife, with one of those rare smiles that so altered the expression of his face.

As for Veronica herself, she could not understand such attention.

"All this for me!" she cried, when she saw the lace, the silks, the velvets, the thousand little elegancies that make up a lady's toilet—fans and slippers, gloves and sunshades.

Then Sir Jasper brought her some superb jewels—a set of rubies that suited her dark loveliness, a set of corals, and a suite of diamonds.

The girl raised a wondering face to his when he showed them to her!

"Why do you do all this for me?" she asked.

He looked down at her. She was looking at him with dead Giulia's love-lit eyes.

"Why?" he repeated. "Because I am your guardian. You will know more some day!"

She took his hand and kissed it in her strange impulsive fashion.

"You are very good to me, and I am very grateful," she said.

But it seemed to him that Giulia's lips had touched him. He shrank back pale and trembling.

"Never do that again, child," he said—"never again." She glanced at him quickly, not understanding. How should she?

"Have I vexed you?" she asked. "I am sorry, for you are so kind."

"You have not vexed me, Veronica," he said. "Why should you have done so?" English people are unused to showing emotion—yours startled me. I am pleased that you like the jewels. I shall be glad to see you wear them when your black dresses are laid aside."

By the middle of December Veronica was quite at home. How she loved Katherine!

She had a strange, vague, undefined sentiment about Sir Jasper—a feeling that even she herself could not understand. She was grateful to Lady Brandon; she would have done anything for her.

But it was Katherine whom she loved—the beautiful, dainty, capricious young heiress—Katherine, who had been the first to love her.

There was something almost pathetic in the way in which she followed her about and waited upon her.

She would have served her almost on her knees. She watched her every look, waited for her every word. Lady Brandon was amused by it, Sir Jasper was pained.

She had been introduced to most of their friends and neighbors; the beautiful Venetian girl whose face was a study, whose voice was like music, was admired by all who saw her.

She went with Katherine to all the balls, the *soirees*, the parties in the neighborhood, where they reigned as queens.

There was no jealousy, no rivalry between them. How could there be when Veronica worshipped her brilliant young sister?

So Christmas came, and it was, as usual, kept up in right good English style at Queen's Chace.

Every man, woman and child on the estate was the happier for its coming, and richer.

Sir Jasper was most liberal. The friends he had invited came, and amongst them was Alton, Lord Wynleigh, who had decided not to leave Queen's Chace until he had won the hand of its heiress.

He conquered after a few days' of hard siege; the lovely, wilful girl had plighted her troth to him, and he knew that she would keep it sacred until death.

It was a pretty love-story, coming to a crisis on Christmas Eve, as he held her under the mistletoe and demanded the forfeit.

"Give me something else, Kate," he said. "A kiss from you is indeed a favor, but I want something more."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want your love, your promise to be my wife, your troth-plight. I want you, my darling, to be my own for ever and ever. What do you say?"

The sweet flushed face drooped before his, the blue eyes could not meet his own, the sweet lips opened, but he did not hear the faint whisper that came from them.

"Kate," he said, "what do you say? You know, my darling, if I thought you did not love me, I would go away now from out of the light of your sweet presence, and I would—well, I should be worth nothing all the rest of my life. You see, Kate, you are a great heiress—that makes all the difference."

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

"Just this—that if you were not a great heiress, I would make you love me. I would clasp you now in my arms and kiss you until you said 'Yes'—but—"

"But what, Alton?"

"If I urged you too much, and prayed and begged of you as it is in my heart to pray, you might think I cared about your fortune; but I do not."

"I am sure you do not," she replied.

"My darling," he said, drawing her nearer to him, "you trust me; you shall see that your trust is not in vain. Will you be my wife, Kate?"

The answer this time must have satisfied him, for he

kissed the lips on which it trembled, murmuring words that were sweetest music to Katherine.

"I shall work for you, Kate," he said—"my Kate, the bonniest Kate in Christendom. I will not ask you to marry me until I have made a position worthy of your father's daughter. I have led a useless life, but it shall be useless no more. I will work for you. Men shall never say I married an heiress for her money. Kate, your sweet love has made a man of me. To-morrow will be Christmas Day, and in the morning I shall go to your father and tell him. Will he give you to me, Kate?"

"I hope so," she replied quietly. "He would do anything to make me happy."

That was why Sir Jasper sat on Christmas morning as the gay bells were ringing, with saddened eyes and darkening face, while the great heart of the world beat high with joy. Lord Wynleigh had waited upon him to make his formal request for his daughter's hand. Sir Jasper listened kindly—he had a great liking for the gallant, handsome, young lover.

"What am I to say to you, Wynleigh? My daughter has many suitors. I should like her to marry the one she loves best."

"That is myself, Sir Jasper," he replied proudly.

Sir Jasper smiled.

"You think so? Well, there is one remark I must make. So far as regards 'worldly goods,' you are certainly not the most eligible lover."

"Never mind that, Sir Jasper," said Lord Wynleigh.

"I know it, and am going to remedy it. Do not imagine that I am saying to you, Give me your daughter now, at once—my hands are empty, but she will fill them. It is not that. I say, Give me the hope of one day calling Katherine my wife, and I will set to work at once. I will make such a name that I shall not be ashamed to ask her to share it. Will you say 'Yes,' Sir Jasper?"

"You speak bravely. You are sure my daughter loves you?"

"Kate says so," the young man replied, "and she never speaks falsely."

"Then I give my consent," said Sir Jasper. "But Katherine is too young to marry yet. She must wait a year or two. The child is but just seventeen. Come back in two years' time to claim her, if in the meantime you have made a position for yourself. I do not care that you should make money, but I do care for the other."

"I will do it, Sir Jasper," he replied, "and you will help me. I shall study under you—help me with your influence. There is a borough vacant now. Help me to place my foot on the first rung of the ladder, and I will never cease until I reach the top."

Long after Lord Wynleigh had left him Sir Jasper sat silent and motionless, listening to the sound of the joy-bells—listening to the music and laughter which filled the old Chace.

What was he to do? When the sanguine young lover left him, dark and bitter thoughts came to him. He was an Englishman, with a hatred of all fraud and deceit. What could he do? He could never allow Lord Wynleigh to marry Kate under the impression that she was heiress to the grand domain of Queen's Chace and Hurstwood. She was not so in reality. All his broad lands belonged by right to his elder child, the beautiful, dark-eyed Veronica. Before Lord Wynleigh married Katherine he must know the truth. Sir Jasper rose from his seat.

"I am a brave man and a strong man," he said; "but I would rather face death than tell my story now."

It seemed so far away to the middle-aged statesman, the story of his youth—the mad love that had altered his whole life. It would be profanation to him to hear Giulia's name mentioned now. He could imagine the sneers, the comments that would follow. The Opposition journals would be sure to get hold of it, and hold up to public ridicule the one treasured poem of his heart. He could not bear it. Come what might, he would, he must keep his secret yet a

little longer; and in the meantime he would have his will prepared—a will in which the truth should be told, and Queen's Chace, with all the broad lands around Hurstwood, given to his daughter Veronica. At the same time he would put all the papers that went to prove her identity into one packet, and give them to her. Why, because her mother was dead, should he rob her of her birthright? What could he do to atone to her for her long, cheerless youth, her cold, joyless life. He could not defraud Giulia's child. If he could have divided the inheritance, all would have been well; but that was impossible. In the Brandon family, when there was no male heir, the eldest daughter succeeded to the barony, to the title and estates; and there had been several Baronesses. Therefore the inheritance must go to his eldest daughter. That was Veronica.

What would those proud Valdoraines—the proudest people in England—say to him when they heard that Katherine was not his heiress after all? Katherine Brandon's name was known all over England. Sir Jasper was at a loss. His sense of justice and his love of right, his love and his pride, his honesty and his sensitive reserve were all at war. There was but one gleam of comfort. The marriage between Lord Wynleigh and Katherine would not take place yet. Some unforeseen combination of circumstances might take place before then.

"It is not quite the kind of marriage that I expected for Katherine," said Lady Brandon when her husband sent for her to tell her. "Still I shall make no opposition—there is a chance, as you know."

"What chance?" asked Sir Jasper.

"They tell me that the young marquis is not only very unsteady, but that he is certainly in declining health," said Lady Brandon. "If it should be so then Alton will be Earl of Woodwyn. That would be a high position—I should be quite satisfied."

"My dear wife," remarked Sir Jasper, "no good comes of hoping for dead men's shoes."

"I am not hoping for them," said Lady Brandon; "I am merely saying that it would be an excellent thing for Katherine."

"Veronica," said Katherine, "come to my room when you go to dress for dinner. I want to tell you something." And when Veronica went in she started at the beautiful vision. Katherine stood before her in a low dinner-dress of white silk, trimmed with glowing crimson holly-berries, her white shoulders and arms gleaming like pearl, a diamond cross on her white breast, and diamond stars in her golden hair. She looked like a dream of beauty. Veronica kissed the pretty shoulders and the white arms.

"How beautiful you are, my darling!" she said. "You look like the spirit of Christmas. Now I see how beautiful Englishwomen can be."

"I am always beautiful in your eyes, Veronica," she replied.

They were standing side by side, Katherine all bright and radiant, Veronica, in her pale, passionate beauty, in a long trailing black dress. The contrast between them was startling.

"I have something to tell you, Veronica," she said. "Never mind admiring my dress, never mind my diamonds—look at my face."

"I am looking at it, my darling," returned Veronica.

"Does it tell you anything?" asked Katherine, with the low sweet laughter of perfect content.

"Only that it is the dearest face in the world," replied Veronica, kissing the laughing lips.

"Veronica," said Katherine, "whom at this moment should you consider the very happiest girl in all the world?"

"The very happiest of all? Oh, how could I tell?"

"I will tell you. It is myself, Katherine Brandon. And can you guess why I am so happy? It is because—oh, Veronica, how shall I tell you?—it is because some one whom I love very much loves me—me, you understand, Veronica

—not my fortune, not Queen's Chace, but me—loves me—and has asked me to be his wife."

"His wife," repeated Veronica, softly. Katherine, the laughing-loving beauty, was suddenly invested with an importance in her eyes which was marvelous. "How wonderful—how strange!"

"Nay, it is not strange, Veronica. I love him—he loves me. Can you guess who he is?"

Slowly the dark eyes wandered over the bright face; and then said Veronica answered—

"It must be Lord Wynleigh."

"Yes," said Katherine simply, "it is Lord Wynleigh; and I am not one of the happiest, but the happiest girl in all the world. Nevertheless, I tell myself that such great joys as mine cannot last—that a time will come when I must suffer and weep and grieve as other people do. Will it be so?" She looked wistfully at Veronica as she spoke. "I have read," she said, "of ships safe enough to sail in when the sea is calm, but sure to sink when the storm comes on. I think I should be like one of those ships—I should go down in the first storm."

"We will hope then that a storm will never come," put in Veronica. "If it depended on me there never should," she added. "Still there is one thing that I can safely promise you—one thing that I will do. If ever it lies in my power to save you from sorrow, I will do it; if ever it lies in my power to give you happiness, I will give it to you."

And the time came when the memory of those words weighed down the balance in which she held both lives.

CHAPTER V.

As Veronica descended the broad staircase she looked in astonishment at the brilliant scene that met her gaze on every side.

The shining lights, the wealth of evergreens, holly with lovely, crimson berries, the graceful laurel with its shining leaves, the dark, stately fir and the sweet, mystical mistletoe—it was all like a dream to her. Her heart warmed as she gazed.

If this was an English Christmas, then might Heaven bless Christmas for evermore!

Everyone had something kind to say; there was a smile on every face, light in kindly eyes, music in the sound of kindly voices.

She thought that while she lived she would never forget the words, "I wish you a happy Christmas;" and the speakers, the kindly people so tender and true of heart, were the cold, reserved English who her aunt had told her were accursed! She looked at the noble faces of the men, faces that told of power and skill, of courage and self-command; she looked at the fair blonde faces of the laughing girls and the graceful women; and she thought that the English were a great people, greater than the old stately Venetians.

There was not even a tinge of envy in her heart as she noted the lovely younger girls.

She was quite unconscious of her own picturesque beauty, of the poetical loveliness of her face, the grace of her figure clad in its trailing black robes.

Among those fair English girls she looked like a gorgeous passion-flower in the midst of white lilies.

She never forgot the Christmas dinner, her first in England—the grand table with its costly silver and delicate glass, the profusion of flowers and fruits, the sparkling wines, the laughter, the general air of happiness, while outside the wind wailed among the leafless trees and the stars shone in the Christmas sky. She saw Katherine with her bright laughing face and her handsome young lover following her like a shadow. Presently Sir Jasper came up to her.

"Do you like our English way of keeping Christmas, Veronica?" he asked.

She looked at him.

"It is more beautiful than anything I have ever seen," she replied; and then he turned abruptly away, for she had looked at him with dead Giulia's eyes.

"Veronica!" said a low deep voice. She turned quickly and saw Lord Wynleigh standing by her side. "I have come to ask you if you are pleased. Walk with me through the rooms. You have not wished me a happy Christmas yet."

"Then I will do it now," she said; and Lord Wynleigh raised her hand to his lips.

"Katherine has been telling me how dearly she loves you and how good you are to her."

"I love her better than anything or anyone in the wide world," she replied.

He looked half sadly at her.

"I have come," he said, "to ask you for a little share of that great affection which you give to my peerless Kate. I will deserve it; I will give you the true, honest, frank, kindly affection of a brother to a sister. Will you accept it?"

She looked up at him.

"I am bewildered," she said. "What have I done that Heaven should give me so much—what have I done? Only a few months since no one loved me, now—"

"You accept it then?" interrupted Lord Wynleigh.

"If you want a friend you will come to me; if ever you want help of any kind, you will remember that on Christmas Day you promised a stalwart brother to let him stand between you and the world."

"I shall never forget," she said.

And Lord Wynleigh left her standing by the door of the conservatory while he went in search of Katherine.

Veronica was unutterably happy: into her gray, dull life such threads of gold were woven that she was dazzled by them. She had hungered and thirsted for love; now it was lavished upon her. She stood on the same spot still, unconscious of her picturesque loveliness; watching Katherine and her lover, and as she watched them strange, sweet possibilities of life came floating to her. She had thought of herself so long and so often as one apart from others, as one for whom life held no pleasures, no hopes; now was the dawn of a golden morning, now the sweet, vague, delicious fancies that thrill the heart of a young girl thrilled her. It might be that in the golden far-off future such love as Alton's for Katherine would fall to her lot. Perhaps her life too, would be crowned by that most pure and perfect gift—a noble love. If Heaven had such happiness in store for her—

"I am afraid," said a deep musical voice near her, "that you will take cold—there is quite a rush of cold air here."

Veronica looked up suddenly. A tall, stately figure stood between her and the light, dark gray eyes were looking into her own.

She saw a handsome, noble face, a proud, princely head covered with clusters of fair hair. It was a face that from that moment stood out clear and distinct from all other faces.

The gentleman smiled at the half bewildered expression of the dark eyes.

"I must introduce myself again," he said. "Sir Jasper introduced me to you just before dinner, but I was one of so many, I cannot hope to have been noticed. You do not remember me?"

"No," she replied. "Sir Jasper introduced so many people to me at once, and English names are hard to remember. I should be glad if you would tell me yours," she added, with some little hesitation.

"You will say that it is a strange one perhaps," he said. "I am Sir Marc Caryll."

"Sir Marc Caryll," she repeated. "I shall remember that in connection with the patron-saint of Venice—St. Mark."

She could not tell why, but the name seemed to sink into the depths of her heart like the echo of a song. Then she looked at him, and decided that, although she had seen some noble men, he was by far the handsomest and noblest.

There was an air of command, of power, of authority about him which pleased her. He looked like a man whose will was strong and relentless, whose purpose was fixed, whose judgment was clear and decided. Self-reliance, courage, bravery—all those qualities were written on that fair, handsome face that had in it at times a woman's sweetness and the simplicity of a child. A sudden thought came to her that a life would be safe in those strong hands of his—honor, fair fame, everything might be entrusted to him, and the trust would be kept.

Sir Marc smiled at her.

"I can read your thoughts," he said; "you have been estimating my character. I will not ask you what you think of it; I will only say I hope your conclusions are favorable. Miss di Cynthia, try one dance with me. Christmas day is past; and an example has been set us."

Veronica remembered that Christmas night—it was the beginning of a new life to her. The vague, sweet possibilities that had thrilled her as she watched Katherine took shape now—vague, beautiful shape; something awoke in her heart which had never been there before—something so tender, so sweet, that the girl's whole soul was moved by it. Life was never to be the same again for her; she had inherited something of the quick love and quick hatred that characterized the Brandons. She had in her more of her father's nature than her mother's.

"Your face is a poem," said Sir Marc later on that same Christmas night—"a poem that I should never tire of reading."

She danced with him, she talked to him; more than one amazed glance followed them—she with her dark Venetian beauty, he with his Saxon comeliness; they seemed to have forgotten the world. Once Sir Marc took her to the great western window in the broad corridor, and, drawing aside the hangings, he said to her:

"Look, Miss di Cynthia—I want you to see the poetry of an English Christmas."

Veronica cried out in wonder and awe.

The sky was of deep, dark, fathomless blue; the moon was full, and shone with a clear, silvery light; the earth lay white, still, and beautiful, under the pale, clear beams; the hard frost made the tall, leafless trees look darker, and the hoar-frost shone in the light of the moon. The wind wailed amongst the trees, bending their tall heads and swaying the huge branches.

"How beautiful!" she cried. "There's nothing in all Venice so fair as this. I thought there was no poetry in England; but it is full of it. This looks like fairyland."

"You will try to love England," he said.

"I try to love it without trying," she replied. "I could almost fancy there was some mysterious reason why my heart should have warmed so greatly to it; it seems more my home than Venice ever did."

He was looking intently at her with his dark gray eye.

"You will not wish to return to Venice then? You would be content to remain in England all your life?"

She raised her beautiful face; the dark eyes looked at the pale, wintry night-sky, at the fair white earth, at the quaint shadows the moon made through the trees; and then she turned to Sir Marc.

"Venice would seem a prison to me after this," she said; and she said it with a wonder why he looked so bright and pleased.

"I should like you to see my home," he remarked. "It is, I think, even more beautiful than Queen's Chase. It is called Wervehurst Manor, and it stands in the loveliest part of Sussex. We have music there—nature's grandest. The sea lies at no great distance; and far away to the right stretches a chain of hills, purple hills on which the light of the sun lies low. I have a passionate love for my home."

She was silent. He went on:

"And I live there, Miss di Cynthia, all alone. Can you imagine that? I have no mother, no sister. There is a large household of servants, but I am quite solitary. I want what the poets call an angel in the house."

"What is that?" asked Veronica.

"That is English for a wife," he replied; and the beautiful face drooped before his.

Her heart beat; a strange pain, that was yet half pleasure, seemed to thrill her innocent soul.

"I must leave you," she said hurriedly. "I am quite sure that Katherine wants me."

"Where you go I follow," declared Sir Marc; and for that evening at least he kept his word.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW life—a glorious new life, bright, hopeful, pleasant, full of poetry, full of wonder and romance! The time came when Veronica began to wonder what it was that had fallen over her life. What was the dazzling light that had fallen at her feet?

Why was it that from morning to night and from night to morning she had but one thought—and that was about Marc Caryll?

Christmas had passed now, and the beautiful springtide had set in. The air was balmy with the sweet breath of flowers, yet Sir Jasper had not recovered much of his strength. The doctors would not allow him to return to his duties; he must rest if he would live. In vain the active, energetic statesman rebelled. He refused for a time to submit, until he saw the absolute necessity of it. Then he found Lord Wynleigh of great use to him. He had been returned as member for Hurstwood, and had made his maiden speech—to everybody's great surprise it was simply a masterpiece of eloquence. Sir Jasper gave up some of his duties to the young politician, about whom people prophesied great things.

The Baronet was very pleased.

It had always been a source of sorrow to him that he had no son to succeed to his honors; but he loved the young nobleman in whom all Katherine's happiness seemed to be centered.

When despondent thoughts came to him, he said to himself that he should have a successor. He insisted upon Lady Brandon's taking Veronica and Katherine to London for part of the season at least, and nothing pleased him better than to read her ladyship's letter in which she told of Veronica's successes and triumphs.

"The girl can marry whom she will," wrote Lady Brandon; "her magnificent beauty has brought all London to her feet. She does not seem to care about anyone in particular."

Veronica had suddenly become famous. Her new style of face and figure, her wonderful grace and musical voice, had made her the observed of all.

She received more invitations than she could possibly accept. Everyone admired and liked her.

But when Lady Brandon had been in town a few weeks, she decided upon returning.

Sir Jasper was no better, and the doctor attending him did not think it advisable that he should delay consulting some eminent physician.

So they went home again, and, as he looked at his two daughters, the master of Queen's Chase was struck afresh. Katherine's animated loveliness, and Veronica's pale beauty seemed to have acquired fresh luster.

Those few weeks in town had wonderfully improved Veronica—they had given a finish and elegance to her such as can be acquired only by mixing with the most refined. She had enjoyed her visit, but not much, because Sir Marc was away.

The season had but little attraction for him. He was not a man of fashion. A cruise to Norway had more charms for him than a season in London. He had written to say that he hoped to pass through Hurstwood in July or August, and would very much like to spend a few days there, to which Sir Jasper had replied by sending him a most cordial invitation, guessing shrewdly what was the attraction; so that Veronica had that to look forward to, and

the knowledge of it made her profoundly indifferent to all the homage offered her.

The old bitter struggle was still going on in Sir Jasper's mind. What should he do?

His heart was torn with a thousand doubts, a thousand fears. There was hardly an hour of the twenty-four during which he did not again and again review all his reasons and doubts.

Do as he would, one or the other must suffer. Should it be Katherine, the bright fair child, the descendant of the proud Valdoraines; or Veronica, who looked up at him with dead Giulia's eyes? Which of the two should it be? He would have given his life to save either.

One thing he had done. He had sent for a strange lawyer, and had made another will, in which he told the secret of Veronica's birth, and left to her the grand inheritance of Queen's Chace and Hurstwood. That will he kept by him. Remembering it, he was more at ease whenever he thought of her.

He grew worse. The doctors did not apprehend any immediate danger; he was only suffering from overtaxed strength, from ills that might be remedied. He did not even keep his room.

Sir Jasper himself was more alarmed than the people about him. Strange sensations came to him. There were times when he fancied, as he walked through the shady garden-paths, that strange voices called him; he saw strange figures in his troubled sleep; strange faces smiled at him from the picture-frames.

One day—how Veronica remembered it afterwards!—he had walked in the grounds, and when the sun grew warm he went into the drawing-room to rest on a couch. Veronica was there. He asked her to read to him, and she did so until he fell asleep; then she sat and watched him, thinking how very ill he looked, how white and sunken his face was.

Suddenly she saw his pale lips quiver; he opened his arms as though to clasp them round someone whom he loved, crying in a passionate voice:

"Giulia, Giulia, my heart's love!"

She touched him gently, and his eyes opened and looked wildly at her.

"Giulia," he cried again, "where am I? It is you, and yet another."

"Sir Jasper," said Veronica, "you are dreaming—you are ill."

He looked in bewilderment at her.

"Giulia's eyes," he said, "but another face. What does it mean?"

"You have been dreaming," remarked the girl quietly.

"Can I get anything for you? Shall I bring Lady Brandon?"

He gave a smothered moan.

"I—you are right, Veronica—I was dreaming. No, do not call anyone; I want nothing. These June days are so warm."

It was June then, when the days were at their longest, and the bright sweet hours were all filled with beauty—June, when Queen's Chace was a picture of loveliness, with its lilies and roses, its rich green foliage and wealth of flowers. Veronica was troubled as she looked at Sir Jasper, for she had grown to love him.

She remembered afterwards how he awoke from a fevered sleep and would have Katherine by Veronica's side.

She remembered every detail of that, his last day on earth.

He would not go into the dining-room, and it was Veronica, by her own special request, who took him some little dainties and coaxed him to eat them.

She knelt by his side, holding in her fingers a ripe sunny peach.

"This is just like Katherine's cheek," she said laughingly. And she looked so like her mother at that moment that he could have cried aloud in his longing love and pain.

"You have learned to love Katherine, Veronica?" he said gently.

"Better than I love my life," she said, blushing to find that she no longer said, "Better than I love anyone else in the world."

He looked up at her suddenly.

"Have you learnt to love me, Veronica?" he asked.

"Yes, just as dearly," she replied.

Then they were silent—he mute with emotion, she wondering that he should speak to her in this strain—he who had always been so distant and so reserved. Then he was restless all the day. When evening came, he asked Katherine to sing all her old songs to him—the songs he loved best; and Veronica fancied that his eyes filled with tears. Then, when it was growing later, he called Katherine to him. She knelt down by his side, and he drew her golden head down on to his breast.

"My child, my darling," he said, "have I been kind to you?"

"Always, papa," she replied.

"Have you had a happy life—Katie, tell me—a happy life?"

"Yes," she answered. "Papa, you know that I have never had one moment's care or trouble, one moment's sadness, ever since I was a child."

"Thank Heaven for that!" he said gently. "If I should die, Katie—die and leave you—would anyone ever make you think me unkind—ever make you love me less?"

"No, never, papa," she said, laughing at the notion—"never."

"Kiss me. Tell me you love me," he said. "Will you remember in the after years that I would have given my life at any time to save you from pain?"

"Yes," replied Katherine, and, obeying his wish, she clasped her tender arms around his neck. "I love you very dearly, papa," she said, "more than I can tell you, and I am longing for the day to come when you will be strong and well again."

Later still, when Katherine was going to her room, he called her to him, and taking the bright young face between his hands, he kissed it.

"Good-night, my darling," he said; "and may Heaven ever bless you!"

She wondered at the solemnity of the words, little dreaming that she had heard his voice for the last time.

"You are not quite so well to-night, Jasper," said Lady Brandon.

"No," he replied. "There is a strange fluttering at my heart—I feel faint—it will pass away. The day has been so very warm."

"I wish," said Lady Brandon, "that you would consult Sir William Fletcher; they say that he is the cleverest physician in England."

"I will see about it," replied Sir Jasper.

It was a lovely June night, one of those nights that never seem to grow dark; the air was rich and heavy with the odor of the sleeping flowers, the dew lay on the white lilies, on the roses, on the purple passion-flowers, the wind stirred ever so faintly the fresh green leaves. It was one of those nights when it seemed impossible to turn from the sweet face of nature.

Veronica had stood for more than an hour at the open window of her room, when one of the servants came to say that she was wanted in Sir Jasper's room.

"Is Sir Jasper worse?" asked Veronica in alarm.

"The valet said he seemed very ill, miss," replied the girl; "but there was nothing said about his being worse."

Without loss of time Veronica left her room. She had not undressed. She still wore her evening-dress of rich black lace with crimson flowers.

She had taken the diamond stars from her hair, and the black waves fell in rich profusion over her shoulders. On her neck gleamed a cross of rubies and diamonds. She walked through the long corridors, where the moonlight lay

great silver floods, making everything else darker by contrast.

Sir Jasper could not be worse, she thought; the servants were most of them in bed, and there was no confusion. She went to the door of his room—a room she had never entered. It was ajar, and Lady Brandon stood near it. She looked very pale and anxious. She had on a white dressing-gown, and was toying nervously with the blue ribbons.

"I do not understand it, Veronica," she whispered. "Sir Jasper has sent for you and for me—he wants us particularly. No one else is to come near. He looks so strange I am half-frightened. Come in."

Veronica entered the statesman's chamber. It was a large and magnificently-furnished apartment. She saw wonders of rosewood and burl, Sevres china, statuettes, pictures, and books. On the bed with its silken hangings she saw Sir Jasper—Sir Jasper, with a grave look on his face and dark shadows round his eyes. She went up to him, and his eyes, looking into hers, told her that some strange, unrevealed secret was between them.

"Close the door," he said—"fasten it securely; no one must interrupt me. Marie, my wife, come here. It is you who will have to forgive me. I have sinned against you; but my sin always appeared to me in a better light than that in which I see it now. It is a gilded sin—a sin so shrouded with sentiment, reserve, poetry, sensitiveness, that I hardly know where the wrong begins or ends—a gilded sin, my poor Marie, and the punishment will fall on an innocent head. Veronica, come nearer to me. I have sent for you—I have a story to tell. Kneel here where I may see your face. Keep those eyes—dead Giulia's eyes—fixed on me to the last, that my strength and my courage may not fail me. Marie, whom I have wronged, give me your hand—I have a story to tell you."

The nightlamp was partly shaded; its feeble rays fell on the gray face, on the dark wistful eyes, on the thin white hands—fell on the two kneeling figures, on Veronica's beautiful face and Lady Brandon's troubled features.

The wind, when it stirred, sent a great spray of clematis beating against the glass; outside the beautiful, solemn summer night lay brooding over the fair sleeping earth.

Sir Jasper told his story, clearly, plainly, distinctly, describing his motives, blaming his own fastidious, sensitive reserve, blaming his own weakness and folly, which had led him so far wrong—led him into what he truly called "a gilded sin." Lady Marie listened with silent, bitter tears.

"So you were married before, Jasper, and never told me," she sobbed; "and I always thought that I was the only one you loved. How could you deceive me?"

"I am sorry, Marie, for the past. I can hardly expect you to understand—I can hardly understand myself; it is so difficult looking back. I loved her so well, and I lost her so soon. I could never speak of her, my dear dead Giulia. I could not utter her name—it tore my heart. I could not look men and women in the face while I talked of her, my dead love."

"Then," said Lady Brandon, "you have always loved her best, Jasper, living or dead—always the best."

"You have been a good, true, tender, faithful wife to me, Marie," he returned, "but she was my first love."

Veronica had listened like one in a dream. This was her history then; and the golden-haired sister whom Assunta had never ceased to mourn was her own mother!

She was the daughter of the famous statesman, Sir Jasper Brandon, who was looking with such wistful eyes into her face.

"You are my own child, Veronica," he said, while Lady Brandon wept as one who could not be comforted—"my own daughter—but Giulia's child! I have longed so often to take you in my arms and tell you so. I did not love you when evil spirits whispered to me that you had cost your mother her life; but I have learned to love you since you have been here, my daughter. Kiss me, Veronica. Say 'Father!' to me just once."

She laid her fair face on his, half-frightened at its deathly chill.

"My father—my dear father!" she said.

"You love me, Veronica—you forgive me?"

"I love you, and I have nothing to forgive. See, father, I kiss you again."

Then Sir Jasper took two packets from under his pillow.

"There is another thing yet to be told," he said; "and this, my poor Marie, I know you will feel. I feel it myself, but I cannot—I dare not die until I have done justice to Giulia's child. It is the law of our race—one that I have neither the power nor the right to change—that, failing a male heir, the eldest daughter shall succeed. You, Veronica Brandon, are my eldest daughter, so you are my heiress—the heiress of Queen's Chace and the domain of Hurstwood."

"That cannot be," cried Lady Brandon—"that is too cruel; it will kill Katherine."

"I hope not," he said faintly. "It is cruel—Heaven knows I feel it to be so; but it must be done."

Lady Brandon had drawn her hand from his feeble clasp; her face flushed hotly; her eyes were full of angry fire.

"My child shall not be robbed," she cried. "I will appeal to all England. It shall not be."

"All England could not prevent it, Marie," he said sadly. "My eldest daughter must be my heiress; after my death she becomes Baroness Brandon. I am quite powerless in the matter."

"It is wickedly unjust," she cried. "I wonder at you, Sir Jasper—you who all your life have passed for an honorable man. You must not, you shall not do my child this wrong."

"Hush, Marie!" he said sadly. "Do not reproach me, my dear; I have suffered enough. Listen, Veronica. This is my will; in it you will find repeated the story of my first marriage—in it you will find that I have made you what you are—my heiress. I have made handsome provision for Katherine—handsome provision, Marie, for you."

"You have robbed us!" cried Lady Brandon. "What am I to say to my friends when they hear of this?"

The Baronet continued:

"This second parcel, Veronica, contains all the papers you will need to prove your identity—the certificate of your mother's birth, marriage and death. There is the certificate of your birth also, and every other paper which your aunt Assunta thought necessary to prove your claim. Take them, Veronica. Kiss me, my daughter; my strength fails me. Promise me one thing in your mother's name—will you promise, Veronica?"

With her white lips on his, which were no less white, she whispered:

"I promise."

"Be kind to my wife and Katherine," he said. "Promise me."

"I will," she replied. Then she raised her head, for a long quivering sigh from him frightened her.

"Go and fetch Katherine," he said—"Kate—my own Kate."

"Are you worse, Jasper?" cried Lady Brandon, forgetting her anger in her fear.

A smile that Veronica never forgot came over his face as he turned to her.

"No, not worse—better," he said. "I see it all now." And the next moment he was dead.

The two horrified spectators stood looking at each other, unable to move. Lady Brandon cried out:

"He is dead—he is dead, Veronica!"

Then going up to the bewildered girl, she seized both her hands.

"Veronica," she cried, "hide these papers. Promise me, swear to me that you will not mention one word of all this until I have spoken to you again. Swear it."

"I promise," said Veronica.

And then Lady Brandon seized the bell-rope and rang a hasty peal.

CHAPTER VII.

By the noon of the following day peace and quietness reigned in the house of death; the passionate weeping and wailing, the first wild outbreak of sorrow, were over. The doctors who had been summoned in such hot haste had given their decision—Sir Jasper had died of disease of the heart. There was no need whatever for the formality of an inquiry—no need for examination.

They had laid the illustrious statesman—the man whose heart had been faithful to one passionate love—in state in his own chamber, with hangings of black velvet and wax tapers, and the fairest June flowers about him whose hands should never more gather leaf or blossom; and then with lingering looks at the marble face, so grand in its sculptured beauty, they had left him to the silence that should never more be broken.

Veronica sat in her own room, a pretty room that opened on to the western terrace—a room where she had all her books, her easel, her piano—where she spent happy hours in study and reading. It was half parlor, half boudoir, as pretty as it could be made by taste, by art, and by affection.

It was dark and gloomy now, with the blinds drawn and the flowers all dead.

Veronica sat there silent, dazed, bewildered. She still wore her evening-dress of black lace—she had never changed it; her dark hair hung over her shoulders, the beautiful face with its passionate sorrow, its untold story, was pale and worn, her eyes looked brighter and darker.

What had she not suffered sitting there—what emotion, what bitter pain, what untold woe?

"His daughter!" She came back again and again to these words—"His daughter."

The proud, noble statesman whom all England revered was her father!

Oh, if she could but have known it before! If she had but had time to pour out the passionate love of her heart to him!

If there had but been time to tell him how proud and happy she was, how she valued her birth-right, how she rejoiced in the knowledge that he was her father!

So many things were clear to her now. She had never understood his strange manner towards her, half love, half avoidance.

One thing after another unveiled itself, so that she almost wondered at last that she had not guessed the secret.

And she was Veronica Brandon, heiress of Queen's Chace.

She repeated the name over and over again to herself—"Veronica Brandon"—and each time she liked it better.

She was heiress of the grand mansion, of the fair domain, of the broad lands, of all the wonders of wealth she saw around her—she who had never known the luxury of having one shilling to spend!

It was no great wonder if her heart beat and every nerve thrilled with the sudden sense of power and wealth.

Henceforward she could do as she liked—she could make everyone happy, she could lavish wealth on the things she loved best, she could do untold good.

She was roused from her reverie by the entrance of Lady Brandon.

Looking at her, Veronica realized what she had suffered—her face was quite white, with dark circles round the eyes.

She had wept almost incessantly since her husband's death, but now she seemed calm with the calmness of despair. She closed the door, and, coming up to Veronica, took the girl's cold hands in her own and looked earnestly into her face.

"Veronica," she said, "have you kept the secret?"

The young girl raised her head proudly.

"Did you think that I should betray it?" she asked. "I am not a traitor, Lady Brandon."

"I know—I know; forgive me for speaking hastily. Veronica, I am almost mad. You cannot realize what I have to suffer—you cannot understand my position. I would rather—these are not wild words, but true ones—I would rather kill myself than that the world should know how cruelly I have been deceived—that I had but the ashes of my husband's love, that he never cared for me, that his heart had been given to another before me. I could not bear it—I could not survive such a downfall to my pride, my affection, my standing and position in the world—I should not survive it."

"I am very sorry," said Veronica; "I cannot help it, Lady Brandon; it is not my fault, you know."

"Think, too, of Katherine, my beautiful child, brought up as her father's heiress. All her life she has deemed herself heiress of Queen's Chace—her future secure. Oh, Veronica, think what a blow it will prove for her! It will kill her!" And the poor lady's lips quivered again. "Then," she continued, "you do not know my people, the Valdoraines. They are the proudest people in England; they would—I dare not think what they will say or do when they hear that my child is disinherited. I shall never look them in the face again. I wish I had died before this day came."

"I am very grieved," said Veronica, "but I cannot help it."

"Poor Katherine—so happy in her future! They called her heiress of Queen's Chace when she lay in her cradle. My pretty child, it is not right, it is not just. I have done nothing to deserve it. All my life I was good and faithful to my husband. He has left me a legacy of sorrow and shame. Poor Katherine—how is she to bear it, Veronica? Will it make her hate him and dislike his memory?"

"No, she is too noble for that," said Veronica. "Have you forgotten what he said to her on the evening before his death?"

"No. Oh, Veronica, my dear, I cannot tell her, I cannot indeed! She has been so light-hearted, so happy all her life. Until now she has never had any sorrow, any care. How can I, her own mother, go to her and tell her that she and I are to be driven out, away from that which we have always held to be our own? How can I go to her and say to her that she must lay down every hope, every brightness of her life, and suffer. Heaven knows what?"

"You forget that she has Lord Wynleigh," said Veronica gently.

"I do not. I foresee fresh trouble there. He loves her, I know, but his friends are proud; they would oppose his marriage to a disinherited girl. She would in all probability lose her love with her fortune. Oh, Veronica, I cannot bear it!" She drew nearer to her. "You love her, Veronica. I know you do. You have said so a hundred times. You said—see, I remember the words—you would give your life for her if she needed it, because she was the first to love you. You said that you would stand between her and every sorrow, that an arrow meant for her heart should first of all pierce yours. You said that, Veronica."

"Yes, and I meant it," she acknowledged.

Lady Brandon drew still nearer to her. It seemed to Veronica that the breath came in hot gasps from her lips.

"She does not want your life, Veronica; to give it would not serve her. Will you serve her as you said you would? Will you let the arrow meant for her heart wound yours?"

"Yes," said Veronica; "you know I will."

"Will you save her youth, her love, her hope? Will you keep her life bright and unclouded? Will you keep her happy, as she has been? Will you serve her loyally, faithfully, as you have said?"

"Yes," she answered again; and then Lady Brandon drew the girl's face down to her own.

"You will do all this? Then, Veronica, burn the will—burn it, and keep the secret until you die."

Veronica drew back pale and trembling.

"Burn the will!" she repeated faintly. "You cannot mean that? How can I? I dare not." She was be-

wildered; no such idea had occurred to her. "Burn the will!" she said again. "Oh, Lady Brandon, how can I?"

"You can do it easily enough if you wish—if you will," declared Lady Brandon. "Who knows of it except you and me? No one. Who knows the secret save you and me? No one. Oh, Veronica, if you would be true to your promise, true to your word, burn the will and forget it!"

"But that would be to disobey the wishes of the dead," said Veronica. "It seems to me I am not my own mistress. My—my father's commands, his wishes—surely I must obey them; surely I must carry out all his plans?"

Lady Brandon stood before her erect, her face eloquent with the passion of her words.

"Veronica, make no scruples, raise no doubts: Are you capable of this great sacrifice for Katherine's sake, for her love's sake? It is much to ask, I know. Have you the generosity, the nobility, the grandeur of soul to make it? You said you would die for her, my fair-haired darling. Would you give life, yet withhold this?"

"I am bewildered," replied Veronica. "I do not know how to answer you."

"Come with me," said Lady Brandon. "Step lightly, Veronica, my darling is asleep. Come with me."

And the two ladies passed out of Veronica's pretty room together.

Lady Brandon led the way to Katherine's room; she opened the door gently and they entered together.

Katherine had exhausted herself with weeping. Her father's death was the first trouble of her life, the first cloud that had ever darkened her sky, the first sorrow that had brought burning tears to her eyes.

She had exhausted herself with weeping, and then she had thrown herself on the pretty white bed and was sleeping the sleep of utter weariness.

Her golden hair lay in picturesque disorder over the pillows, one white rounded arm was thrown above her head—even in profound slumber her lips quivered and deep sobs came from them. She was too exhausted for any sound to reach her now.

Lady Brandon took Veronica's hand and led her to the bedside.

"Look," she said—"Veronica, see how young and fair she is; see how innocent and helpless. Think how she has been loved and cherished. Do not throw her on the mercies of a cold world. Think of her life; do not blight it. Think of her love; do not take it from her. Veronica, if above this tender white breast you saw a sword hanging, you would not let it fall. If you saw a hand clutching a dagger and pointing it at that tender heart, you would thrust it aside. Look at her, Veronica, so unconscious of this tragedy. Will you wake her to tell her that you are going to take her inheritance, her fortune, her happiness—all, even her love from her?"

Veronica turned away with a shudder.

"Come with me again," said Lady Brandon—and this time she led the way to the room where the dead statesman lay.

She closed the door, and, holding Veronica's hand tightly clasped in her own, she led her to his side.

"I have brought you into the solemn presence of the dead. He who lies there called this sin of his a gilded sin. Veronica, he did not foresee, he could not know, the suffering and the sorrow that would fall upon us. Oh, Veronica, is it just? Is it fair? Is it right? Why should this disgrace fall now upon me? Have I deserved it? Is it honorable that we should so suddenly be deprived of our own—our position, our inheritance, all that life holds most dear? Did you love him, Veronica, this dear dead father?"

"Yes," she replied.

It seemed to Veronica that all power of speech had left her—that she could not utter the words that rose to her lips.

"You did love him; then spare him. You could do nothing so hurtful to his memory as to let this secret be known. All England reveres him now, all England does homage to

him. He is numbered amongst the great ones of the nation. Oh, Veronica, how they would denounce him, those who have loved him best, if they knew that in very truth he had left his wife and child to bear the brunt and the burden of his concealment! They would blame where they have praised. You will take a hero from his pedestal. You will shadow a grand memory, detract from a fair fame, if you tell his secret. And you will gain—what? A fortune that you will never enjoy, an inheritance that will prove more of a curse than a blessing, an inheritance that will be almost a fraud. Veronica, burn that cruel will."

"But others must know of it," she said.

"No," asserted Lady Brandon: "the lawyer who drew up that will is dead—dead, I tell you. I remember that Sir Jasper went to a strange lawyer whose name was Mathews, and that some days afterwards he said that a strange thing had happened. He had asked Mathews to attend to some little business for him, and a few days afterwards he had died suddenly. I remember it so well. One never misses much what one has never had, Veronica. You have never been considered or treated as the heiress of Queen's Chace. You would not miss the distinction. But Katherine has. Katherine has grown up with the thought; it has formed part of her life. My dear, I plead to you, I pray to you—burn that will. For Katherine's sake, by your love for her, by your promise to shield her, for your dead father's sake, to save his name from rude comment, to shield his memory from all stain of reproach, I, your father's widow—I, Katherine's mother—kneel to you—I beg of you to grant what I ask!"—and Lady Brandon knelt before Veronica with outstretched hands.

Veronica rose, sublime in her emotion; a light that did not seem to be of this world shone on her face.

"For your dead father's sake, Veronica!" sobbed Lady Brandon.

"I will do it," she replied. "I will burn the will, and I will keep the secret until I die—and in death I will keep it still."

Lady Brandon rose and drew the girl to her father's side.

"Swear it here," she said; "lay your hands on his breast—above his heart here. Now swear to me that you will never take Katherine's inheritance from her—that you will never lay claim to it—that you will never betray the secret of your birth and parentage."

Veronica swore it.

"Kiss his lips," cried Lady Brandon; "they would open to bless you if they could."

Veronica kissed his lips.

"It will lie between us, father," she said, "this secret of ours."

Then she started up in alarm. The struggle had been too much for Lady Brandon—she had fallen to the ground. The servants who came to her help thought she was ill from grief; and they bore her with pitying words to her chamber, while Veronica went back to her room like one moving in a trance.

Not for long had she been heiress of Queen's Chace—not for long had she called herself Veronica Brandon, Sir Jasper's daughter.

All the nobler, higher, better part of her nature had been roused by Lady Brandon's passionate appeal.

She forgot in her enthusiasm all that the sacrifice would cost her.

She remembered only that she was securing Katherine's happiness and saving her father's fair name.

She sat quite still and silent, while the birds sang outside her window, and the sunlight brightened the whole glad world—how many hours she never knew.

She reflected that her golden dream was over, that she would be Veronica di Cynthia now until she died.

Then she roused herself.

The will must be burned before she saw Lady Brandon again.

She would not read it. That would simply renew her

pain and could not benefit her. She must destroy it at once.

She went to the box in which she had put it away, and took it out.

She read, "The last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon, Baron of Hurstwood, &c."

She kissed the name, and her tears fell on it. How could she destroy it?

Curiously, instead of being written on paper, it was written on thick parchment that she could neither tear nor cut.

On this June day there was no fire anywhere.

She could not go down to the servants' offices to burn it there, for she would be noticed, and harm might come of it.

The only way was to have a fire made in her sitting-room, and burn it there.

The bell was answered by Clara Morton, a pretty girl whom Sir Jasper had advised her to take as her maid.

She carefully placed the will out of sight, and then when the maid entered, she asked her to light a fire in her room.

"A fire," repeated Clara Morton—"a fire here, miss?"

"Yes," said Veronica.

"But," objected the girl, "it is so warm—it is quite a hot day, miss. I am afraid the heat will be too much for you."

"There is no warmth here," said Veronica.

And the maid, seeing the shudder that made her young mistress' graceful figure tremble, thought perhaps she was really cold.

Still it was a strange thing to ask for on a June day; and more than once, as Clara Morton lighted the fire, she said to herself that it was unnatural, and that there must be some reason for it.

Still she obeyed. But the fire would not light. Three or four times it went out, and each time Veronica had to ring again.

"How bent she is on it," said the girl to herself.

"What can she want a fire for? There is something mysterious about it."

At last the fire burned brightly; and then Veronica fastened the door and took out the will again. She held it in her hands, looking first at the parchment roll and then at the flames.

It seemed to her as though she held something living.

Wealth, honor, fortune, position, the honor of a noble name—these would all perish with the document when she laid it on the flames.

Should she destroy it? Was it not like taking the life of some living thing?

"I will do it," she said; "not by halves, but generously. I make this sacrifice, and Heaven sees me. I make it to secure my sister's happiness, and to save my father's memory. I make it with all my heart in return for their love for me, and I shall never regret it."

Then she parted the coals and placed the parchment between them.

In a few moments there was a thick smoke, and, seeing no more of the parchment, she thought it was destroyed.

She watched the thick smoke as it rose; what did it bear with it of hers?

There was some one at the door—who could it be? She cried out, "Who is it?" And Clara Morton answered:

"I want you very particularly, if you please, Miss di Cyntha."

Veronica opened the door, and the girl looked wonderingly into her pale face.

"I have brought you a cup of tea, miss," she said; "I thought you wanted something." Her quick eyes noted the heavy smoke in the fireplace; she withdrew without a word. In a few minutes she was back again. "Miss di Cyntha," she cried, "I wish you would come to my lady's room; I have knocked at the door several times and can get no answer. I am afraid there is something wrong."

And Veronica hastened away, not noticing that she had left the girl in the room behind her.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHAT could you mean, Clara?" said Veronica, when, some ten minutes afterwards, she returned to her room. "Lady Brandon was not even asleep, and she says that you have never even touched the door."

"Is it all right, miss?" asked the girl, as though she were in a state of breathless suspense.

"Right? Yes. Lady Brandon never even heard you," said Veronica.

Clara answered that her ladyship must have been asleep, but did not like to say so.

Veronica noticed that the girl's face was flushed, her manner strange; but she did not think much of it at the time.

Presently Clara quitted the room, after saying a great deal more about the fright and relating an anecdote of a lady who she knew who had been found dead of grief soon after her husband's death.

Then Veronica wondered just a little that she should talk so much. As a rule the girl was respectful and doile.

Left alone again, Veronica would not think of what she had done; that was all forgotten—all past.

She was Veronica di Cyntha—had never been anything else.

She looked into the smouldering fire—the last vestige of the parchment had disappeared. The papers she had kept; they could not hurt, and she felt that she would like to look at them from time to time. She went back to Lady Brandon's room, and clasped her arms round her.

"I have burned it," she said—"it is all destroyed; and I have come to mention it for the last time—to tell you that you may trust me as you would yourself."

Lady Brandon fell weeping on to her neck, telling her that she was blessed, thrice blessed, for that she had saved herself and her child from what was far worse than the bitterness of death.

"You may entrust your future to me, Veronica," said Lady Brandon. "I have two thousand a year of my own, and I will settle the half of it on you."

So the matter was never mentioned again by Veronica or her father's widow. The next day they buried him, and his place knew him no more.

All England mourned for the dead statesman, and never wearied of praising him, while the mantle of his greatness fell upon Lord Wynleigh.

* * * * *

A year had passed since the death of Sir Jasper. Lady Brandon had spent it at Queen's Chace. Some had advised her to go away, to take her daughter abroad; but the Chace seemed to have an attraction for her.

When the year that she had given to seclusion had passed, their first visitor was Lord Wynleigh. They were delighted to see him; it was such a bright, cheerful change.

Lord Wynleigh was growing anxious now about the time of his probation. He made Veronica his confidant.

"I know that I can trust you," he said, "because you love Kate so dearly. I have worked hard this last year and a half. I have made a position. I have laid the foundation of future fame and fortune. I grant that I have made no money; but that does not matter—Kate and I understand each other so well. She knows that if she had not one shilling in the world I should love her just the same—more, if possible; but we should have to wait for years. As it is, I do not see why we should not be married at Christmas. Do you, Veronica?"

How she thanked Heaven in her heart that she had done as she had—that she had sacrificed herself! If she had kept her inheritance, then Katherine could not have been married.

Lord Wynleigh wondered at the light that came into the girl's beautiful face. How little Veronica dreamed at

that moment of all that would come to pass before Christmas-time!

There had not been the least difficulty in the settlement of Sir Jasper's affairs; the will that he had made when Katherine Brandon was an infant was still in the hands of the family solicitor—everything was perfectly straightforward.

Lady Brandon explained that she understood Miss di Cynthia's affairs, and should continue to act as her guardian. She had loyally kept her word, and had settled one thousand a year upon Veronica. She showed her gratitude to her in a hundred other ways; she was most kind to her; but the one subject was never mentioned between them again.

Sir Jasper's fair-haired daughter had become Baroness of Hurswood; she was called Lady Katherine at home, and the bright days passed with naught save pleasant hours.

One beautiful August evening, when the red glow of the western sunset filled the sky, Veronica stood under the shade of the tall lime-trees, watching the evening light. A happiness had come to her, so great, so sudden, so entrancing, that she was dazed by it, bewildered. For Sir Marc Carril had asked her to be his wife.

She did not know until then all that slept in her heart—the love, the passion, the tenderness—and the waking had startled her. She was lost in wonder at herself. The crown and the glory of her womanhood had come to her. She rejoiced in the new and perfect happiness; she opened her whole heart to hear it. It was such chivalrous wooing, and he loved her so dearly. No one could ever have been so dearly loved before.

She stood there thinking of it, with a smile of perfect content on her face, and as she did so Sir Marc came to her.

"I have been watching you, Veronica," he said, "until I have grown jealous of the sky and the foliage, and everything else that your beautiful eyes have rested on. What have you been thinking of?"

"Of nothing in the wide world but you," she replied.

"Of me, sweetheart!" he exclaimed joyfully; and then he told her what he had come to ask—when would she be his wife.

"You are too kind ever to be cruel, darling," he said, looking at the beautiful flushed face. "I told you long ago how lovely my home is. I want 'the angel in the house'—I want you there. You cannot tell how dreary it all seems to me. Veronica, when will you come to me?"

"Not yet," she replied shyly—"it cannot be yet."

"Why not?" he asked.

"You have only just found out that you love me."

"Nay, Veronica," he said, smiling, "I found that out long since. I was coming last July to tell you so, but poor Sir Jasper had just died."

She turned her face away lest he should see the quiver of passion in it.

"Sir Marc," she said gently, "you have never asked me any questions about my family or my home in Venice, or my fortune."

"Lady Brandon has explained," he replied. "Your father was a great friend of Sir Jasper's, she tells me."

Veronica made no reply. She could not tell him the truth, but she would speak no false word to him—more was she not bound.

"I have nothing about your fortune, sweetheart. I am a free man, so free that I am troubled at times to know how to spend my money. I live it all at your feet. You are master of everything that belongs to me. What will you come home, my Veronica? You have nothing to make for. Do not be unkind and send me away."

She made no answer. In her heart she wished to be with him, but the very consciousness of it prevented her from speaking.

"This is July," he said; "shall we say September, Veronica?"

She agreed, and Sir Marc was so determined to keep her

to her word that he went at once in search of Lady Brandon and told her.

He brought her back with him to where Veronica still stood under the limes.

"I leave my interests in your hands, Lady Brandon," he said. "I shall return, with your permission, to marry Veronica on the twentieth of September. You will promise that she shall be ready?"

Lady Brandon promised.

"I do not think that I can live away from her altogether until then, Lady Brandon. Will you invite me to come down in August?"

"Come whenever you will, Sir Marc," said Lady Brandon.

He pressed the hand of his love.

"I have bound you, sweetheart," he said—"you can never free yourself again."

And looking at his handsome face, his eyes lit with love, she said to herself that separation from him would be death.

CHAPTER IX.

AUGUST had come with its ripe, rich beauty; the fruit hung in the orchards, the gardens were a blaze of color, the barley and the corn were ready for the reapers. Sir Marc had come down again to the Chase.

Those who had seen Veronica when she first reached England would hardly have recognized her had they seen her now.

The beautiful face had changed so completely; the pale, passionate loveliness had deepened into something more lovely still; there was more color, more brightness; the dark love-lit eyes had in them the radiance of full and perfect content.

Love had beautified her, even as it had beautified her life.

On this August morning she was in her pretty boudoir alone—alone, for Sir Marc had gone in search of something to please her. He lived only to make her happy.

She stood in the midst of a hundred beautiful things. Lady Brandon had determined to present her with her treasures, and a large chest had arrived that morning from Paris.

Veronica looked at her magnificent gift. It did not strike her as it would have done at another time.

She could think only of her happiness and her love.

She was smiling to herself, wondering whether a girl was ever so blessed, so happy, when some one rapped gently at her door.

She looked up in surprise when her maid, Clara Morton, entered the room.

"I want to speak to you, Miss di Cynthia, if you can spare time," she said.

Veronica made some courteous answer, and felt some more surprised when the girl closed the door and fastened the lock. The large, long window that led to the terrace was open—neither of them thought of it.

"Why do you do that, Morton?" asked Veronica.

"Because I have that to say to you which must be said without interruption."

Veronica looked up with brightly gleaming eyes.

"You behave very strangely," she said; "I do not like it." She looked fixedly at the girl, whose face was not pleasant to her, then a little light in her eyes, as if of some great secret, shone in her whole manner.

"You must listen to me, Miss di Cynthia," she said. "I hold a secret of yours and I must be paid for it."

"You can have no secret of mine," returned Veronica.

"But I have," said the girl. "Listen to me. I am engaged to marry John Pidding, who once lived here as head groom. We have been engaged to be married for eight years, and fortune has never once smiled on us. He saved three hundred pounds and put it into a bank. The bank broke, and he was left penniless. I saved some pounds, and invested it in a building society, which has since

bankrupt. Fortune has never once smiled on us until now. Now John Palding has an offer from a farmer in Australia. If he can go out there, and take five hundred pounds with him, we shall make our fortune."

"I do not see what this has to do with me," interposed Veronica.

"I do, Miss di Cyntha. I hold a secret of yours, and I want five hundred pounds as the price of my silence."

"You are talking nonsense, Morton. I can only imagine that you have lost your senses."

"You will find, on the contrary, Miss di Cyntha, that I was never more sensible in my life. Let me tell you what I have to say."

Veronica looked at her. In the excitement of the interview she had risen and confronted her.

"Come to the point at once, please," said Veronica. "What have you to say?"

The girl looked uneasily at her mistress; the color came and went in her face; her eyes drooped. Raising her head, she said suddenly:

"It is for John's sake—I would do anything for John."

Veronica gave a sigh of resignation. What this strange scene meant she could not tell, but it would end at some time no doubt.

Morton heard the sigh.

"You are impatient, miss," she said. "I am coming to the matter. I do not like to speak of it to you; you have been a kind mistress to me. But it is for John's sake—I would do anything for him."

"Will you be kind enough just to come to the point?" said Veronica.

"I will," answered Clara Morton.

Yet Veronica saw that she had to summon all her courage, to make a most desperate effort. She looked up at her.

"You remember Sir Jasper's death, Miss di Cyntha? You remember the day after it? Though it was a warm June day, you would have a fire in your room?"

Veronica started; her face grew white, a low cry came from her lips.

"Go on," she said to the girl, who had paused abruptly when she saw the change in her mistress' face.

"That very day, miss, I thought there was something wrong," she said. "Why should you want a fire when the June sun was shining so warmly? I said to myself that you had something to burn."

Another low cry came from Veronica. Morton continued:

"I—you will be very angry with me, Miss di Cyntha—I watched you; I knelt down and looked through the key-hole. The key was in the lock, so that I could not see much, but I saw distinctly a roll of parchment in your hands, and I saw you put it on the fire. I saw it begin to burn, and I was wild to know what it was. All at once I had an idea that you were destroying something that belonged to Sir Jasper, and was determined to know."

She paused, while the beautiful face gazing into hers grew deadly white.

"I invented an excuse to get you from the room, Miss di Cyntha," she continued. "I told you that Lady Brandon had not answered a knock at her door—it was simply an excuse to get you from the room. Then I took from the fire the charred remains of the parchment. I saw quite distinctly the words, 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon,' Miss di Cyntha. It was but a charred fragment—I took it away with me; and now, Miss di Cyntha, I accuse you of having burned Sir Jasper's will. You cannot deny it—I have the proofs."

Veronica stood like one turned to stone. She lost all power of speech. The girl continued:

"I can form no idea why you did it—that does not concern me—perhaps it was for your own interest. They said in the servants' hall that Sir Jasper had left you money; perhaps the will you destroyed took it from you."

There was a flash as of fire from the dark eyes.

"I do not wish to do you any harm, miss. I have not mentioned what I saw to any one, and I never will; but you must give me five hundred pounds for keeping your secret. Give me that, and I will promise, I will swear, that no allusion to what I have seen shall ever pass my lips. Give me that and I will bring the charred fragment to you. I do not wish to harm you, but Providence has given me this chance and I must make the most of it. From that one moment I said to myself that I would keep your secret until I could use it. Give me five hundred pounds, and I will be as faithful as death to you."

Then the power of speech came to Veronica.

"Even if I would condescend to bribe you," she said, "I could not; I have not five hundred pounds of my own in the world."

"You have a rich lover," returned the girl, with a significant smile. "Sir Marc would give you anything in the world—his heart's blood if you needed it."

"Hush" said Veronica, sternly. "I will not allow you to say such words."

"You may do what you like, miss—I shall keep to my word. If you give me five hundred pounds, I will never reveal your secret; if not, I will betray it."

"What if I refuse?" said Veronica. "Tell me the worst."

In her heart she knew the worst must come; it was as impossible for her to find five hundred pounds as it would have been to find five thousand.

"The worst is that, if I fail to get the money from you, I must try to find out who is the next most interested in the matter. There is one thing that you cannot deny, Miss di Cyntha—you burned the will." She paused with a sudden cry.

Unperceived by either, Sir Marc had entered through the open window, and stood with a horror-stricken face, listening to the last few terrible words.

With an air of terrible bewilderment he looked from one to the other; Veronica was as white as death, the servant-girl insolent in the full triumph of her accusation, in the knowledge of her victory.

Veronica looked round when she saw the sudden dawn of fear in the girl's eyes.

She uttered no cry when she saw her lover, but a cold, terrible shudder seized her. He came to her and took her hand.

"What is the matter, Veronica? What does this insolent woman say? Why do you allow her to insult you?"

"Truth is no insult, Sir Marc," put in Morton.

"Say the word, and I will send for a policeman, and will give her into custody. I heard a little of what has passed, and I see she is trying to extort money from you—why not order her from the house?"

"Ah, why not?" cried Morton, insolently. "As you say, Sir Marc, why not?"

"I take the duty upon myself," he said; "I order you not only to quit the room, but to quit the house. Lady Brandon will approve of what I have done when she hears of your conduct."

"I shall not leave the room, Sir Marc," she replied quietly, "until I have Miss di Cyntha's answer. She knows what I want: let her say if she will give it to me."

"You know that I cannot," she answered.

Sir Marc looked at her in bewilderment.

"Surely you are not willing to compromise with this woman, Veronica? She must be punished—any attempt to extort money is a crime that the law punishes very severely. Do not speak to her—leave her to me."

Then he passed in bewildered wonder; there was something he did not understand—a shrinking fear in Veronica's face and an insolent triumph in the maid's.

Where was the indignation, the just anger, that she should feel?

What could it mean?

With a restless, uneasy gaze he looked from one to the other.

The dark eyes of the woman he loved had never met his own.

"I heard what passed," he said. "I was bringing you these Gloire de Dijon roses, Veronica, and I heard this insolent woman say that you had burned a will—that you would not deny it. I know the meaning of that. She brings this false accusation against you, meaning to extort money from you, and you very properly refuse to give it to her. She ought to be sent to prison."

"Stop, Sir Marc," said the woman angrily—"you speak too fast. Ask my mistress whether my charge against her is false or not."

"I will not insult Miss di Cyntha by any such question," he replied.

"Then you are unjust," she said. "You accuse me of bringing a false charge; ask Miss di Cyntha whether that charge is true or false—she will not deny it if you ask her."

Still there came no words from the white lips that were closed so strangely.

"I refuse to do any such thing," he returned.

"Again, Sir Marc, I say that you are unjust. I accuse Miss di Cyntha of having in her own room, unknown to everyone, and, as she thought, unseen by everyone, wilfully burnt Sir Jasper Brandon's last will and testament. More than that, I can prove that she did so. Now, Sir Marc, look from her to me—which of us looks guilty?"

He looked at Veronica as though half expecting an indignant denial. None came.

"Miss di Cyntha," she continued, "tell Sir Marc, who accuses me of bringing a false charge, whether you destroyed that will or not."

Still there was no answer.

"I swear to heaven that I saw her do it, and that I have the proofs," cried the maid. "I should not speak so plainly before you, Sir Marc, but that hush-money will do from you as well as from her."

Then Veronica spoke; she went up to him, and without looking at him, she said:

"Will you send that woman away, Marc? I shall die if she remains here. I will speak to you when she is gone."

It struck him with a pang more bitter than death that she had never once denied the charge.

"Go," he said to Morton; "leave Miss di Cyntha's presence, and never dare to seek it again. Leave this house at once. If in one hour from now you are within the walls, nothing will save you from prison."

"And nothing will save Miss di Cyntha from penal servitude," she rejoined.

The woman's persistence in her story astounded him, while Veronica's silence bewildered him. It could not be true—of course it was false; but it was evident from her silence that there was a mystery.

"Hush!" The white lips had opened again, and a voice that was unlike any he had ever heard came to him in the sunlit silence. "Do not drive her to extremes. Send her away."

Then Sir Marc, pointing to the door, said:

"Go! Leave the house; but wait for me at the railway-station at Hurstwood. I will see you there."

The woman left the room, and he took Veronica in his arms.

"Sweetheart," he said, "what is this mystery? Why did you not deny that woman's outrageous charges? My Veronica burn a will! You cannot think how it has distressed me." He kissed the white, cold face, which looked as though neither warmth nor color could ever brighten it again; his heart was full of keen, intolerable pain.

"There is some mystery, Veronica," he went on; "I can see that. Tell me what it is."

"I cannot," she said.

And the two simple words were more terrible to him than any others.

"At least, my darling," he pleaded, "tell me that it is not true. I cannot endure that you should remain silent

under such a charge; it is unwomanly almost—deny it. I ask no explanation of the mystery; my sweetheart shall be as free and unfettered as the wind that blows. But I do ask this—deny those horrible words."

Then she looked at him, with the pallor of death on her face. She tried to speak lightly, but her lips trembled. She tried to smile, but her smile died away.

"What if I could not deny it, Marc?"

His face flamed hotly.

"Great Heaven, Veronica," he cried, "do not jest over such a subject as this—do not jest about a crime! I could not have thought you capable of such light words."

"I am not jesting," she answered, faintly; "I never thought of doing so."

She saw his face grow stern and his eyes take a cold, hard expression.

"Veronica," he said, "answer me one question—it is your own fault that I have to ask it—is that woman's charge true? She says that she holds proofs—is it true? Tell me—did you burn a will or did you not? answer me."

She knew that it would be useless to resist her faith even if she could lie—Morton would produce the charred fragments as evidence. She—Veronica—would not attempt to screen herself. He must think what he would.

"Did you destroy a will, Veronica?" he repeated,

"Answer me—I shall go mad with suspense."

She raised her white face to his, and spoke slowly:

"It is quite true," she said—"I did burn Sir Jasper Brandon's last will and testament; yet listen—I would deny it if I dared, but if that woman holds those fatal proofs it is useless."

He drew back from her as though she had stabbed him.

"You do not mean it, I am sure," he said—"you cannot mean it—it would be too horrible. You are saying it to try my love—only for that—to try my faith, my darling; you could not have done it."

"Was it so great a crime?" she asked, simply.

"A crime?" he repeated. "The person who could even ask such a question must be dead to all sense of honor and shame. A crime? I should place it next to murder."

"I did not know it," she said softly; "I never thought of that."

He looked at her in horror.

"Then you did it—you really and truly did it, Veronica?" he said.

"Yes, I did it, Marc," she replied, sadly.

"What was the reason? Why did you do it? What was your motive? Tell me, that I may understand."

"I cannot do that," she replied, sadly. "I can tell you no more than this, that I of my own accord burned that will."

"Great Heaven," he cried, "it is incredible! Did anyone else know?"

"I cannot tell you," she replied.

"Was anyone else present?"

"No," she answered.

"Was the will you destroyed one against your own interests? Did it take money from you, or what?"

She raised her dark eyes in solemn wonder at the question.

"You must think what you will of my motives," she replied—"I cannot explain them to you."

"It is incredible!" he cried. "I could believe you and myself both mad before I could believe this. Is it some foul trick, some horrible farce?"

"No," she replied, "it is the simple, terrible truth. I destroyed the will, but I did not know it was such a crime as you say."

"And if you had known?" he cried.

"I should have destroyed it just the same."

"You swear it is true?" he said.

"I swear it," she replied.

They stood looking at each other, while the sunbeams fell between them and the birds sang on the roses outside the window.

Veronica was the first to break the terrible silence.

"Marc," she said, "you will not betray me?"

"No," he replied, slowly, "I will not betray you, lest the iron hand of the law should grasp you. Great Heaven, how could you have done such a deed?"

She looked at him with a shudder.

"Could I really be put into prison for it?" she said.

"Yes, if those whom you have defrauded chose to prosecute you," and then he wondered, for a soft sweet light came over the white stillness of her face.

"I see," she said, slowly—"I understand."

"Veronica," he cried, "how callous you are! You seem to have no shame for the deed that you have done."

She was asking herself what she should do—how she should make him understand; and then, with a great, sharp, bitter pang, the thought came to her that she could never make him understand—that she could never break her oath, the oath taken with her hands on her dead father's heart. He was looking at her with wistful eyes.

"You, Veronica," he said, "whom I thought of all women the most perfect, will you tell me why you did this? Will you give me some explanation of the mystery—any key by which I may solve it? Will you say one word that will lessen my misery?"

"I cannot," she replied. "I am bound in chains of iron—I cannot. I tell you this one bare fact—I burned the will. You must trust me all in all, or not at all."

"Trust you? Great Heaven, trust a woman who could burn the will of a dead man! Stay—tell me one thing. Did he wish you to destroy it? Did he ask you to do so?"

"No," she replied, "he did not."

"Then do not ask me to trust you, Veronica. No man's honor would be safe in such hands. If there is mystery, and you will explain it to me, good—that will do; if not, we must part."

She held out her arms to him with a low cry.

"Part," she repeated—"part—you and I?"

"Yes," he answered coldly, "if it broke my heart a hundred times over. You do not suppose that I, a man of honor, could marry a woman who had deliberately destroyed the will of a dead man? I would not marry such a one even if the loss of her killed me."

"I never thought of that," she said, clasping her hands.

"I should imagine not," replied Sir Marc. "I could never look at you without remembering what you had done. I should be wretched, miserable. We must part."

"Part!" she repeated faintly. "Oh, Marc, I thought you loved me so!"

"Loved you? I love you even now despite what you have done; but marry you I cannot, Veronica. Your own conduct has parted us."

"You must not leave me, Marc," she said, holding out her arms to him. "You are more than my life; you must not go."

"I could never trust you," he said, holding back her arms lest they should clasp his neck unawares. "There is no help for it, Veronica. Unless you can explain away this mystery, we must part. Think it over, and give me the answer yourself."

She stood quite silent before him, her white face drooping from the sunshine, her hands clasped in mortal pain. Was there any chance, any loop-hole of escape?

Could anything absolve her from her solemn vow? No, there could be no release. It was for Katherine's sake, for her father's memory—the same urgent reasons that had influenced her before existed now.

Were she to be induced to break her vow, Katherine would suffer tenfold. She would keep it.

"Must we part, Veronica," he said—"we, who have loved each other with so great a love, must we part?"

"Unless you can trust me, and let me keep silence," she replied.

"I cannot trust you; I can only say good-bye. Good-bye, Veronica. You have broken the heart of the man who has loved you as few have ever loved. Farewell!"

He did not touch her hand, or kiss her face, or stop to utter one more word. Perhaps, if he had done so, his strength would have failed him. He left her standing there in the sunshine, with the bitterness of death hanging over her.

He went at once in search of Lady Brandon. He found her in the pretty morning-room, alone.

She cried out when she saw his pale, set face.

"What is the matter, Sir Marc? What is wrong?"

"I want to speak to you, Lady Brandon," he said. "Veronica and I have had some unpleasant words. We have had a quarrel that can never be healed, and we have parted forever."

Lady Brandon held up her hands in dismay.

"Can it be possible, Sir Marc, that you have parted with Veronica? Why, she will break her heart! It must not be. Let me go to her—let me talk to her. If she has offended you, she will, I am sure, be very sorry; let me go to her. I know how she loves you, my poor Veronica."

"It is quite impossible," he said, hurriedly. "This quarrel can never be healed; even if Veronica wished it, I could not."

"You are angry, Sir Marc," asserted Lady Brandon; "and when your anger subsides you will be sorry for this."

"I shall regret it all my life," he said; "no one knows that better than I do. There will never dawn another happy day for me. Lady Brandon, I am a lost, ruined man."

"You will think better of it," she told him. "How could you quarrel with Veronica? I know no one like her; she is so good, so tender of heart, so true, so loyal."

"No more!" he cried, shuddering. "I can hear no more!"

"You must hear me," Lady Brandon persisted. "I cannot have Veronica sacrificed to a mere fit of temper."

"It is worse than that," he declared.

"Have you thought what the world will say, Sir Marc? Her wedding-dress is ordered—her *trousseau* is prepared. Everything is being put into a state of readiness for the wedding. What am I to say?"

"There is nothing to say," he replied gloomily, "except that Veronica has dismissed me. I will take all the blame, all the shame, all the disgrace. But, Lady Brandon, there is one thing that I should like to ask you. Do not talk to her about our disagreement. Do not ask her any questions. That which we have quarreled about lies between us a dead secret. Promise me that you will not ask her any questions; it will only distress her and do no good."

"But, Sir Marc, will you not trust me, and tell me something at least?"

"No," he replied. "You have been very kind to me, Lady Brandon—let me say good-bye to you, and thank you heartily for all your goodness to me."

"You will surely stay and see Katherine?" cried Lady Brandon.

"No. Tell her that I had not the courage to stay and see her, but that I hoped she would be kind to Veronica."

Then Lady Brandon broke down and wept passionate tears.

"You will break Veronica's heart," she cried—"you should not leave her."

"Heaven bless you for a kind-hearted, generous woman!" he said, bending down to kiss her hand. "I wish all women were like you. I shall go at once. You will see that all belonging to me is sent after me, Lady Brandon?"

But she only sobbed that he should not leave Veronica.

"Go to her," he said; "and, Lady Brandon, while you comfort her, do not speak to her of me." The next moment he was gone.

She was almost bewildered to know how to act.

"I would give much to know what the quarrel has been about," she said to herself; "but I suppose I shall never learn." And then she went to Veronica's room.

The unhappy girl had fallen where her lover had left her, and lay like one dead on the floor.

Lady Brandon raised her; she tried to bring back consciousness to her; and then she thought to herself, "If she really loves him so well, and they have parted for ever, it would be more merciful to let her die."

CHAPTER X.

CRUSHING the green leaves and the sweet blossoms under his feet, trampling down the smiling flowers, beating aside the trailing sprays, his heart beating, his brain on fire, Sir Marc hastened across the park.

It seemed to him that the whole world had suddenly crumbled to ruins.

He muttered bitter, terrible words to himself.

If the stars had fallen from heaven it would have surprised him less than the fact that Veronica had done wrong—his ideal, the one pure, noble, gentle soul in whom he had placed all his trust.

All that was beautiful, poetical, maidenly, and charming seemed to be vested in her; and now his ideal had been rudely destroyed.

"I will never believe in any human being again while I live," he said to himself—"never! So fair, so beautiful, so loving, so tender, yet so lost to all sense of what is right! I will never look again at woman's face!"

He reached the railway station at Hurstwood, and there, half hidden by a long black veil, he saw Clara Morton. She rose as he came up to her.

"It is well," he said, "that you are a woman; if you were a man I would horsewhip you!" There was such fierce, hot anger in his eyes that she shrank back. "You need not fear," he added scornfully. "Give me your proofs, name your price, and then never let your shadow fall across my path again."

Dealing with a man was different from frightening a delicate, refined girl; Clara Morton found. She began a whole string of excuses.

"Not one word," he said. "Simply repeat the story. Let me hear all the details, and then give me your proofs and name your price."

She told him the story, and then added:

"My proofs are the charred remains of the parchment that I took from the fire, on which you will see plainly these words, 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon.'"

"What do you want for it?" he asked, contemptuously.

"It is not for myself, Sir Marc—it is not indeed. I want five hundred pounds."

"You are modest in your demands, certainly, and you have ruined— But why should I waste words upon such as you? If I give you the sum you name, you must not only surrender what you are pleased to call your proofs, but you must take an oath to keep the secret and leave England. If you return—listen to my threat—if you dare to return and address by letter or by word of mouth that hapless lady, I will have you indicted for conspiracy, and your sentence will probably be hard labor for life. As to your conduct, it is so utterly, horribly base I have not patience to speak of it."

The woman murmured some words. He did not even listen to them.

"I have no wish to hear more," he said. "I will give you a cheque for five hundred pounds on condition that you give me your proofs and take the required oath. Tremble if you dare to break it—tremble if your false, wicked face is seen here again!"

He took out his cheque-book, and going into one of the station-offices, made out a cheque for the sum named. On returning he placed it quietly in her hands, and she gave him the packet containing the charred fragments of the will, and took the oath upon which he had insisted. Silently he pointed to the great open gates, and she passed out of them. They never met again. As she passed out of the gates, so she passed out of his life. Whether the punish-

ment of her wickedness ever came in this world he never knew.

Then Sir Marc went away to London. What to do with himself he could not tell. He felt that it was impossible for him to take up the broken thread of his life. In the first hot, angry flush of his disappointment he had not realized what life without Veronica would be. Now that it stretched out before him in all its chill, terrible reality, he was at a loss how to endure. There were times even when he almost wished that he had forgiven her. Then he recoiled from the thought. How could he love a woman to whom the word "honor" was an empty sound?

Sir Marc was most unhappy. He read with a stony face all the paragraphs which said that there was no foundation for the rumor of the approaching marriage of Sir Marc Caryll—that he was going abroad.

He made no complaint, no moan; but he owned to himself that his life was ended.

He would close Wervehurst Manor, and spend the remainder of his days where nothing could remind him of the love he lost. There was to be no angel in the house for him.

He knew that he must love Veronica until he died—that no one else could ever take her place—that no one else could ever be to him what she had been.

Had she died, it seemed to him that his grief would have been easier to bear.

Then he would have retained all his love; now his love must go, while he was stranded. Life had lost all its attraction for him.

He had freed Veronica from her bondage—of that he was pleased to think.

No one could frighten her now. She was quite safe, and the terrible secret was dead and buried.

He locked away the charred fragments; he did not destroy them—he could never tell why; and that one simple proceeding altered the whole destiny of his life.

Had there been a fire in his room when he reached home, he would have tossed the little packet into the flames; as it was, the door of his iron safe was open, and he flung the packet into it.

Then he set about making arrangements for going abroad; but he found that it would be impossible—that he could not leave England until after Christmas without neglecting duties that his conscience would not allow him to neglect.

He said to himself that he must be content. There was no help for it.

He must shut himself up in the old Manor House where Veronica's sweet face would never shine.

Time would pass when once he was over the seas—he would live on excitement. Anything would be better than staying in England.

Yet by night and by day—despite all his stern resolves to forget Veronica—he was always asking himself why she had burned the will—what her motive was—what she had gained by it. Was it possible that the will took from her some legacy or gift?

"I never thought that she even cared for money," he said to himself over and over again. "She seemed so free from all mercenary taint. Why did she destroy the will?"

The more he thought about it the more he was puzzled, the greater grew the mystery.

He drove himself almost mad with conjecturing; but he never even faintly guessed the truth, it never dawned across him.

So the time wore away; he bore patiently all comments and remarks.

It was supposed by the world in general that he had been dismissed by Miss di Cyntha; no one had even an inkling of the truth.

He grew pale and thin during those few months; but they passed at last.

Two days before Christmas Day all his arrangements were made, and he was ready to sail.

He bethought himself then that it would only be right to destroy the charred fragments of the will, for if they fell into other hands there would be danger; and one wild day in December, when the wind was wailing and roaring round the house, he went to the safe and took from it the little parcel.

The snow was beating furiously against the window, great masses of cloud darkened the heavy skies; then came a lull in the storm.

Never until the day he dies will Sir Marc forget the hour and the scene.

With some curiosity he went to the window to examine the charred fragments; quite distinctly he saw the words—"The last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon."

"Poor child!" he murmured to himself. "What could have prompted her to do this most evil deed?"

A little robin-redbreast fell with fluttering wings on the window sill, beaten down by the snow and the wind; it lay there fluttering, gasping, with its little life almost gone.

He was tender of heart, this man so stern in morals; he could not endure the sight of the little bird's agony.

He dropped the parchment and opened the window.

He took in the little helpless creature, he warmed it and fed it, and then bethought himself of the will.

He hastened to pick it up; it had opened as it fell, and as he raised it he saw words that he had not seen before.

He took it to the window, and as he examined it his face grew white, great dark shadows came into his eyes, and he cried:

"Great Heaven! How is it that I have never even thought of this before?"

CHAPTER XI.

GREAT had been the consternation at Queen's Chace when Lady Brandon, in few curt words, said that Miss di Cynthia's wedding was postponed indefinitely.

The worst of it was there came no solution to the mystery—whether there had been a quarrel or not no one could say.

All that was known was that Sir Marc had left quite suddenly one day, and that two or three days afterwards those interested had been told to cease all preparations for the wedding.

No one was more astonished than Katherine when her mother told her the news; and at first she refused to believe it.

"There is some mistake, mamma," she cried; "I would more readily believe that Alton did not care for me."

"Unfortunately there is no mistake," said Lady Brandon, sadly.

"Whose fault is it?" inquired Katherine. "Not Veronica's? I am quite sure that Veronica loved Sir Marc more dearly than I can tell. It always seemed to me that her love was her life. It cannot be Sir Marc's, for he loved the very ground she stood on. I cannot understand it, mamma. What does Veronica say?"

"Nothing. She only looks unutterably sad and miserable, and begs of me not to talk about it."

"I will go to her myself," said Katherine, impulsively.

"It is useless, Katherine," returned Lady Brandon. "She will only be more miserable than ever."

But Katherine would not be controlled. She hastened up to Veronica's room and found her favorite standing by the window.

"My darling, you have been ill!" she cried. "Mamma says that you fainted."

Then she started, for Veronica had turned round to greet her, and the change that had come over her was so terrible that the young heiress was shocked.

Veronica's face was pale and worn, the dark eyes were tearless, but there was in them a look of fathomless woe.

"Veronica," cried the girl, "it is true then! I can see from your face that it is true; there is no need to ask a question. You and Sir Marc have parted!"

"Yes," she said, drearily, "we have parted, Katherine—not for an hour, a day, or a year, but forever."

"I will not believe it! What has come between you who loved each other so well?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Veronica, with a long, low sigh.

"You must tell me," declared Katherine. "I want to help you. I could not live and know that you were unhappy, Veronica. I must follow Sir Marc and bring him back."

"I cannot tell you anything about it Katherine," said Veronica. "And yet I may tell you this. He asked me to do something for him, and I refused; he placed the alternative of parting before me, and I took it. You will ask me nothing more?"

"No," she replied, musingly—"that is, unless you like to trust me more fully."

"I cannot," said Veronica with a shudder; "he has gone, and we shall not meet again in this world; yet I was worthy of his love. To me it seems that I have stood by him dead and kissed him for the last time."

Her voice had in it a ring of weary despondency, her eyes were fixed with a strange dazed expression, her hands were folded and lay on her knees. She looked up at Katherine.

"Kate, give me one promise," she said, "just one. Tell me that you will never renew this subject. To renew it will be simply to give me bitter pain. Promise me that you will never do so."

Her face had such an imploring look that the young heiress could not resist.

"I do promise," she said; and then for one minute the dreary calmness of the beautiful face was broken.

"Kate, come and sit by me," she requested; "let us talk of you—not of me—of you and your bright life, your happy love." She took the young heiress caressingly into her arms. "Come and tell me, dear, how happy you are—it will comfort me a little. You are all the world to me—it will comfort me so much to hear that you are really happy; talk to me about it." It seemed to the lonely desolate soul and the aching heart that there would be some little support, some little comfort, in hearing that her great sacrifice had not been in vain—in knowing that Katherine would gain from her—Veronica's—sorrow.

"It seems so selfish for me to talk of happiness while you are so sad, Veronica."

"It will comfort me," she pleaded—"you do not know why, but it with comfort me."

"Then," said the young heiress, "I am happy, Veronica. My life is so bright, so beautiful, that I would not change it for any other life." She paused.

"Go on," requested Veronica.

"I am rich," said the young girl, "and—I am like a child—I love my position. I love my grand, beautiful inheritance."

Then Veronica raised her head, and a faint smile came over her white-troubled face.

"You are sure of that," she questioned eagerly—quite sure?"

"Yes, indeed I am," replied Katherine. "No one could even guess how dearly I love the Chace."

"Now tell me about your love," said Veronica.

"What can I tell you, dear, save that my love and my life are one—that I have no thought, or wish, or desire, that does not begin and end in Alton? Now has that comforted you?"

"Yes, more than anything you could have said. You could have thought of nothing that would comfort me one half so much. You will leave me now, Kate—I am the better for your coming, dear—and when we meet again all will be forgotten, except that we love each other."

It had not been all in vain then; the sun of her life had set in darkness and gloom, but she had made one at least happy. So the past was mentioned no more. She tried to bear her life. She never complained. She was like a devoted daughter to Lady Brandon. She was the most loving

of sisters to the young heiress. But day by day she grew more and more sad; she grew pale and thin; she began to hope that Heaven would take pity and let her die soon.

So the winter months came round, and at Christmas preparations were begun for the marriage of the young heiress. Lady Brandon had invited a large circle of guests, and one of them, not knowing of the recent *contraints*, having just returned from Spain, spoke of Sir Marc Caryll, and said that he was going to take up his residence abroad.

Veronica overheard it. She did not speak; the lovely face grew paler, and a mist of unshed tears dimmed the beautiful eyes; but soon afterwards she went to Lady Brandon's room, her marvellous self-control gone at last. She stood before her with a look that Lady Brandon never forgot.

"You must let me go away," she said; "I cannot remain here. I cannot bear it. You must let me go home to Venice to die."

Then she wept as she had never wept in her life before, as one who had no hope—until Lady Brandon was alarmed, and she herself was exhausted. Lady Brandon said to her:

"You shall go; I will take you. You shall go to Venice, or where you will; only wait—wait, for my sake, until the wedding is over."

So for the sake of the woman who had influenced her so strongly she waited, but it seemed to her and to everyone else that those days brought her nearer death.

"Do people ever die of a broken heart?" she thought. "A year ago I was strong and well. I had color in my face and light in my eyes; I had strength in my limbs and joy in my heart. Now my strength has left me; people look grave when their eyes rest on me; life is a heavy burden that I would fain lay down—and why? What has happened?"

"I have lost my love! The man who took my heart from me has left me, and—I may hide it as I may—I am pining for one look at his face before I die. Oh, Marc, my sweetheart, could you not have trusted me even ever so little? I shall send for him when I am dying, and ask him to hold me in his strong arms. Oh, Marc, you might have trusted me, for you were all I had in the world!"

So she wore her heart and her life away, longing only for death, that dying, she might see him again.

CHAPTER XII.

"PEACE ON EARTH," rang the Christmas-bells—"Peace on earth, good-will toward men!"

The music came pealing over the snow, stirring men's hearts with warmth of love.

It was such a Christmas as had not been seen for years, so bright, so clear, so frosty.

The country people said strange things must happen, for the holly was so full of berries.

Queen's Chace was unusually gay. Outside in the deep woods the snow lay thick and white, the evergreens stood out like huge sentinels, the dainty laurel-leaves held little nests of snow, the fir raised its head with a stately air, for King Christmas never came in without it.

The world was so fair and so bright; great icicles hung like huge diamonds from the trees and the hedges.

Lord Alton had arrived, and was so engrossed with his fair young love that Lady Brandon had ceased to expect anything from him.

He had been, like everyone else, alarmed when he saw Veronica.

Her pale, shadowy loveliness had startled him, and many of the whispered words between Katherine and himself were about her.

On that Christmas night she looked more fragile and more beautiful than ever.

By Lady Brandon's desire she wore a dress of costly black velvet; with a suite of superb rubies; but the white rounded arms had grown thin, and there was a shadow over her beauty.

She was sitting watching Katherine's bright face, flushed into greater brightness by her lover's words, when one of the footmen coming to her said, in a mysterious undertone:

"You are wanted, Miss di Cynthia."

"Wanted!" she repeated. "Where? Who wants me?"

"I cannot say, miss—some one who has a message for you; some one who is waiting for you in the library."

Veronica had some poor pensioners to whom on this Christmas Day she had been most liberal; it was one of those come to thank her, no doubt.

It was not a nice time to choose; and she wondered just a little why the servant should show such a one into the library.

She rose and quitted the room; as she passed through the broad corridor she stopped for a moment and looked through the windows at the lovely Christmas night—at the moon shining on the white snow, and the shadows of the great wailing boughs.

In the faint far distance she heard the bells of Hurstwood church.

"Peace on earth," they were chiming—"good-will toward men." Then she remembered the poor pensioner waiting, and went on to the library.

She was surprised to find the room badly lighted. There was a ruddy glow of firelight, and one lamp was burning dimly; but it was a large, long room, and the other half of it was full of soft dark shadows.

She entered and stood for some minutes in silent expectation; there was no sound, no movement, and she never glanced to where the dark soft shadows lay.

The red firelight fell upon her fragile beauty, on the slender figure and white wasted arms, on the beautiful, passionate, restless face and the rubies that gleamed on her white throat.

Presently from where the dark soft shadows lay came a sigh. She looked up.

"Who is that?" she demanded. "Is anyone here—anyone who wants to see me?"

Then she stopped abruptly and stood rooted to the ground, a low cry on her lips and a pain as bitter as death in her heart—surely a figure she knew was coming to her out of the soft dark shadows!

She held up her hands as though to ward off an evil presence, and then they fell by her side as she uttered a low, passionate cry.

It was he—she had made no mistake—it was Marc Caryll, the man she loved better than her life, the man whose stern decision was killing her.

They stood in the red glow of the firelight looking at each other, but she saw there was no sternness in his face now—nothing but passionate love, passionate pity, and blinding tears.

"My darling, my beautiful sweetheart, have I been the cause of this?" he said, touching the wasted arms. "Have I been the cause of this, Veronica?"

"I thought I was never to see you again," she said faintly. "Are you sorry that you were quite so hard? Have you come to tell me so?"

Her words seemed to recall him to himself.

"I have come to tell you that I was a madman—a blind madman!" he cried. "I hate myself so utterly for my folly, Veronica. My darling, my noble, generous darling, I know why you burned the will."

She clasped her hands with a murmured word he did not hear.

"I know why it was, and I blame myself for my great folly," he continued. "I ought to have understood—I ought to have known that you were incapable of anything wicked. I deserve to lose you for not having understood you better."

She raised her face to his.

"You cannot know why I destroyed it," she said. "Even the wicked woman who saw me burn it did not know the reason."

"She did not, but I do. Are you surprised? Veronica, see what this has told me."

He came nearer to her, and, taking a paper from his pocket, unfolded it; and then she saw the charred fragments of the will.

"Look on this side first," he said. "Here are the words 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon.' The woman read those."

She looked at them with some curiosity, the words that had cost her so dear. Then Sir Marc opened the parchment.

"Now look," he said, "at what is written here."

She bent over him and read:

"My beloved daughter, Veronica Brandon, hitherto known as Veronica di Cynthia."

She cried out as she read the words. It seemed to her as though Heaven itself had cleared her.

"Those are the words that the woman did not read," he said. "They are clear to me. The moment my eyes fell upon them I understood it all. I know, just as well as if you told me, that Sir Jasper married your mother long years ago—in Venice, I should imagine—and that she died quite young, leaving you. Why he gave you up I cannot even imagine—perhaps you will tell me; but it seems to me that he kept the fact of his marriage a profound secret—why I cannot say. Then," he continued, "I believe that on his death-bed he gave you this will, leaving, as was right, his estates to you, his eldest daughter, and that you, in your noble generosity, your great self-sacrifice, rather than disinherit your sister, burned the will and never mentioned it. Is it so?"

"I cannot answer you," she said. "I will tell you why. I took an oath of silence with my hands upon my dead father's head."

Then she stopped with a cry of dismay. She had betrayed herself!

"He was your father then," said Sir Marc. "I knew it." He took her hands in his. "Sweetheart," he said, "my life has been a curse to me since I lost you. Forgive me—forgive my absurd folly, my miserable suspicion, my unjust thoughts. Give me the great treasure of your love again, and I will promise on my part the most inviolable secrecy—I will never betray the secret of your birth or the secret of the will. I do not deserve such pardon, but—"

The answer was certainly not given in words. There was silence in the room after that—silence full of happiness. How long had it lasted? Veronica started in alarm.

Lady Brandon was standing near her with a most alarmed expression on her face.

"My dear Veronica," she was saying, "where are you? Who is this with you?"

She looked still more alarmed when Veronica raised her happy, tear-stained face, saying:

"Lady Brandon, this is Sir Marc. He has come back, and we are friends again."

"We are more than friends, Lady Brandon," broke in Sir Marc; "we are lovers—and I hope we shall soon be husband and wife."

Then Lady Brandon went to seek for Katherine; and while she was gone Veronica turned to her lover, saying:

"Marc, swear to me that you will never utter a single word to Lady Brandon about the will—that you will never betray to her your knowledge of my birth."

He promised; and that was the only secret Veronica kept from him. He did not know that Lady Brandon ever heard either of the marriage or of the will.

"I knew it must be so," said the young heiress, as she stood holding a hand of each. "You have wasted four months in a lovers' quarrel that has nearly killed Veronica, and now you have made it up again. Mamma, their wedding must be on the

same day as ours, and we will take Veronica to France until she grows quite strong again."

And it was all carried out as she proposed.

"What are those bells chiming, Veronica?" asked her lover as they walked down the broad corridor together. "What is it? The music seems quite familiar to me."

They stood for a few moments watching the moon shining on the snow, and listening to the grand hosannas of the winter wind as it swept over the woods.

Then she turned to him and answered:

"It is the oldest and sweetest music that the earth knows—'On earth peace, good will toward men.'"

THE END.

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